



Interdisciplinary Research in Gender

RE-WRITING WOMEN AS VICTIMS

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Edited by
María José Gámez Fuentes, Sonia Núñez Puente
and Emma Gómez Nicolau



Re-writing Women as Victims

This volume critically analyses political strategies, civil society initiatives and modes of representation that challenge the conventional narratives of women in contexts of violence. It deepens into the concepts of victimhood and agency that inform the current debate on women as victims.

The volume opens the scope to explore initiatives that transcend the pair abuser–victim and explore the complex relations between gender and violence, and individual and collective accountability, through politics, activism and cultural productions in order to seek social transformation for gender justice. In innovative and interdisciplinary case studies, it brings attention to initiatives and narratives that make new spaces possible in which to name, self-identify, and resignify the female political subject as a social agent in situations of violence. The volume is global in scope, bringing together contributions ranging from India, Cambodia or Kenya, to Quebec, Bosnia or Spain. Different aspects of gender-based violence are analysed, from intimate relationships, sexual violence, military contexts, society and institutions.

Re-writing Women as Victims: From Theory to Practice will be a key text for students, researchers and professionals in gender studies, political sciences, sociology and media and cultural studies. Activists and policy makers will also find its practical approach and engagement with social transformation to be essential reading.

María José Gámez Fuentes is Full Professor in Gender and Media at the Universitat Jaume I. Her research focuses on feminist theory, the analysis of gender representations and the transformation of cultural violence. This has been developed through several stays at the University of Nottingham; Goldsmiths, University of London; the University of Roehampton; and Columbia University, among others. She has also led R+D projects on the resignification of women as victims and ethical witnessing. She has published extensively in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, *Social Movement Studies*, *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, *Hispanic Research Journal*, *Cineaste* and *Peace Review*.

Sonia Núñez Puente is Associate Professor in Gender and Media at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos. She has led national and international projects on feminist digital activism, gender-based violence and the image of women in the area of cultural studies. Together with the writer Lucía Etxebarria, she is co-author of *En brazos de la mujer fetiche* (2002). She has been a Leverhulme Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) and a lecturer at Vanderbilt University (USA). She has been a visiting scholar at the universities of Cambridge (United Kingdom) and Humboldt zu Berlin (Germany), among others. She has published in journals such as *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Review*, *Journal of European Women's Studies* and *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*.

Emma Gómez Nicolau is Assistant Professor in Methodology and Sociology at the Universitat Jaume I. She is a member of REMUVIC Project Modes and practices of resignification of women as victims: from vulnerability to resistance. She is also member of DESiRES (Sociology and Methodology studies of Inequalities and Resistances). She has been a predoctoral fellow at the University of Valencia, Spain, and a visiting scholar at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture (Cardiff University). Her research interests are feminisms, menstrual and health activism and youth studies. She has published several articles and book chapters on the modes of recognition of gender violence.



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Contributors

Priscyll Anctil Avoine is a PhD candidate in Political Science and Feminist Studies at Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada) for which she received the prestigious Vanier Scholarship. She completed an MA in Peace, Conflict and Development Studies from Universitat Jaume I (Spain) and a BA in International Studies from Université Laval (Canada). Her research interests are focused on the reintegration of women combatants, gender and peacebuilding as well as Feminist Security Studies. She is currently conducting her PhD research project on embodiment and emotions in the post-disarmament militancy of female ex-combatant in Colombia. She recently co-published an article, “Misogyny in ‘post-war’ Afghanistan: the changing frames of sexual and gender-based violence” (*Journal of Gender Studies*, 2018) and a book chapter “From ‘Polymorphism of Violence’ to the Complexities of Peace: Towards an Integral Dignity in Colombia” (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017). She is actively involved in the NGO Fundación Lüvo, promoting feminist and decolonial actions towards peacebuilding.

Sarah Banet-Weiser is Professor and Head of Department in the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (1999); *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (2007); *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012) and the recent *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018). She is the co-editor of *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (2007); *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (2012); and the forthcoming *Racism Post Race*. She is currently the co-editor of *Communication, Culture & Critique* and has written a column for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* on popular feminism.

Jessie A. Bustillos Morales has been a Senior Lecturer and Course Leader in Education Studies at London Metropolitan University for over five years. She currently teaches at undergraduate and postgraduate level, on different education programmes looking at intersections between sociological

theory, educational and social policy and contemporary issues in education. An important part of her work is broadening the notion of education beyond schooling, as well as highlighting issues of gender in education, and these interests feed into her teaching and academic writing. She is co-editor of *Understanding Economics in Education* by Routledge and has written on social problems, gender studies, new media and youth cultures online. She is interested in feminist theory and looking at the theoretical, philosophical and sociological intersections between education, culture and new technologies. These interests underpin her current writing exploring issues of inequality in women's experiences within the policy of Universal Basic Income to be published in 2020.

Elena De Sacco completed her PhD in Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool in 2019. Her thesis applied Feminist Discourse Analysis to investigate the role of the speech of victims/survivors at the centre of high-profile media portrayals of sexual violence. During her PhD, she also worked in rape crisis support centres. She recently obtained a degree in secondary education and currently works as a teacher of Modern Foreign Languages. Her current research interests include feminist discourse analysis and the pedagogy of foreign languages and media literacy.

Emma Dolan is currently a PhD candidate and teaching assistant in the University of Aberdeen's School of Social Science. Her doctoral project provides the first systematic, gendered approach to the practice of political apology. She has also been a research assistant for a Carnegie Trust-funded project which examines war commemoration and military culture in Scotland. Her research interests include gendered justice, militarisation and the politics of victimhood. She has recently published "Sexual Violence, Political Apology and Competing Victimhoods" (*International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2019) and "Scottish Soldier-heroes and Patriotic War Heroines: the Gendered Politics of World War I Commemoration" (*Gender, Place and Culture*, 2019) with N. Danilova.

Nandana Dutta teaches English at Gauhati University and also holds additional charge of the Gauhati University Institute of North East India Studies. Her research interests include English and its history and practice in India, Postcolonial Theory and Literature, Women's Studies and North East India Studies. Among her publications are *Questions of Identity in Assam: Location, Migration, Hybridity* (Sage 2012), *Communities of Women in Assam: Being, Doing, and Thinking Together* (Ed. Routledge 2016), and *Mothers, Daughters and Others: Representation of Women in the Folk Narratives of Assam* (Ed. ABILAC 2012). She has written on violence, terrorism in the North East India, representation of violence. Relevant essays are 'The Face of the Other: Terror and the Return of Binarism' (*Interventions* 2004), 'Massacres and Media Representations: Viewing North-East Violence' (*Journal of Creative Communications*,

2012), ‘Narrative Agency and Thinking about Conflicts’ (*Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology*, Wiley-Blackwell 2015), and ‘Public Anger, Violence and the Legacy of Decolonization in India’ (*Global Lynching and Collective Violence*, Vol 1. U of Illinois Press, 2017).

Laura Favaro holds a PhD in Sociology from City, University of London. She is an independent researcher and educator interested in feminist theory, gender and sexuality, media and culture, having published both in Spanish and English in journals including the *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies* and *Australian Feminist Studies*. Her work has also appeared in edited collections like *Pornographies: Critical Positions*, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* and *Collecting Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques*.

Diana Fernández Romero holds a PhD in Communications. She is a senior lecturer in Communications and Media at Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain). Her research interests include Discourse Analysis, Communication and Gender, Gender-based Violence and Digital Feminist Activism. Her doctoral thesis “Destruction and Reconstruction of Identity in Abused Women: Analysis of Autobiographical Discourses and Public Information Campaigns” was awarded a special PhD prize, and it also received the Doctoral Thesis Award on Gender Violence granted by the Government Delegation for Gender Violence. Her most relevant publications are Fernández Romero, D. (2019). “Spain’s campaigns against gender violence: the effect on abused women’s identities from the victim-agent dichotomy”. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 1–15; Núñez Puente, S., D’Antonio, S., Fernández Romero, D. (Forthcoming). “Twitter activism and ethical witnessing: possibilities and challenges of feminist politics against gender-based violence”. *Social Science Computer Review*; Núñez Puente, S; Fernández Romero, D. & Vázquez, S. (2017). “Online feminist practice, participatory activism and public policies against gender-based violence in Spain”. *Feminist Theory*, 18 (3), 299–321; Núñez Puente, S., Fernández Romero, D., & Rubira García, R. (2015). “Online activism and subject construction of the victim of gender-based violence on Spanish YouTube channels: Multimodal analysis and performativity”. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 22(3), 319–333.

María José Gámez Fuentes is Full Professor in Gender and Media at the Universitat Jaume I (Castellón, Spain). Her research focuses on feminist theory, the analysis of gender representations and the transformation of cultural violence. This has been developed through several stays at the University of Nottingham, the University of Goldsmiths, the University of Roehampton and Columbia University, among others. She has also led R+D projects on the resignification of women as victims and ethical witnessing. The results of her work have appeared in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, *Social Movement Studies*, *International*

Journal of Iberian Studies, Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies, Hispanic Research Journal, Cineaste, and Peace Review. Her most recent publications are *Gender and Violence in Spanish Culture: From Vulnerability to Accountability*, coedited with R. Maseda García (Peter Lang, 2018) and “The Chiaroscuros of White Postfeminist Empowerment in The Fall”, co-authored also with R. Maseda García, in Lind, R. A. (ed.), *Race/Gender/Class/Media. Considering Diversity Across Audiences, Content, and Producers* (4th edition, Routledge, 2019).

Rosalind Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at City, University of London. Her work is animated by questions about power and social justice, and she works at the intersection of cultural and media studies, gender and sexuality studies and psychosocial studies. She is author or editor of several books including *Gender and the Media* (Polity, 2007), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process* (with Roisin Ryan-Flood, Taylor and Francis, 2010), and *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture* (with Meg-John Barker and Laura Harvey, Polity, 2018). She is working on a book about the psychic life of neoliberalism.

Emma Gómez Nicolau is Assistant Professor at the University Jaume I, Department of Philosophy and Sociology. She is a member of REMUVIC Project Modes and practices of resignification of women as victims: from vulnerability to resistance. She is also member of DESiRES (Sociology and Methodology studies of Inequalities and Resistances). She has been a predoctoral fellow at the University of Valencia, Spain, and visiting scholar at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture (Cardiff University). Her research interests are feminisms, menstrual and health activism, and youth studies. She has published several articles and book chapters on the modes of recognition of gender violence. Her last publications are “Time’s Up, celebrities and the transformation of gender violence paradigms: The case of Oprah Winfrey’s Speech at the Golden Globes” (*Teknokultura*, 2018) with R. Maseda García, and “Silenced Voices: Prostitutes, Lesbians, and “Bad Women” in Spanish Public Policies on Gender Violence” (Peter Lang, 2018).

Rahat Imran is Associate Professor at the School of Creative Arts, University of Lahore, Pakistan. She holds a H2020 Marie Curie BREMEN-TRAC COFUND Post-doctoral Fellowship in Cinema Studies (2013–2015) from the Department of Film Studies, Media Studies, and Media Education, Excellence Initiative, Elite University of Bremen, Germany. She completed her PhD in Cinema Studies from the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada. Her interdisciplinary research and peer-reviewed publications focus on Cinema Studies, Gender Studies, Communication Studies, Human Rights, Post-colonial Studies, Cultural Studies, South Asia, and women’s issues and cinemas in the Muslim world. She has published the first

academic book on Pakistani documentary cinema: *Activist Documentary Film in Pakistan: The Emergence of a Cinema of Accountability* (Routledge Publishers, 2016; 2018). She is recipient of the European Commission Marie Curie H2020 Post-doctoral Individual Fellowship Award (2010–2021) for her research project on cinemas and the Muslim world, at the Department of Film and Screen Media, University College Cork, National University of Ireland. Currently, she is working on two books: monograph on comparative cinemas; co-edited volume on post-colonial theory in South Asia.

Olga Jurasz is a Senior Lecturer in Law at the Open University, UK. She specialises in international law, human rights and legal responses to violence against women (including online violence). Her research focuses on how various mechanisms of international law address the long-term impact of armed conflicts on women and how women's rights are protected in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. Olga has published widely in the areas of her research for both academic and non-academic audiences, including a book on *Gender and War: International and Transitional Justice Perspectives* (Intersentia 2019, co-edited with Solange Mouthaan).

Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira is a professor of Literature at the University of Nairobi and Director of the African Women Studies Centre in the same university. The centre is multidisciplinary and aims to ensure that African women's experiences, knowledge and perspectives find their way into academic discourse, scholarship and development policies. Furthermore, the centre involves itself actively in the implementation processes of these policies. Prof Kabira has published widely in the field of literature as well as in gender and development studies. She was Commissioner and Vice Chair of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission and has fomented the role of women and their gains in her book *Time for Harvest: Women and Constitution Making in Kenya* (1992 to 2010). She has worked with and has led various women's organizations in Africa.

Sue Kossew is Chair of English and Literary Studies at Monash University where she was Head of the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies from 2010–2013. Her previous academic position was at the University of New South Wales where she was Head of the School of English, Media and Performing Arts. Her research is in contemporary postcolonial literatures, focussing particularly on the work of J.M. Coetzee and on contemporary Australian and South African women writers. Her monographs include *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J.M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Rodopi, 1996), *Writing Woman, Writing Place: Australian and South African Fiction* (Routledge, 2004) and *Rethinking the Victim: Gender, Violence and Contemporary Australian Women's Writing* with Anne Brewster (Routledge, 2019). She has

edited *Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville* (Rodopi, 2010) and co-edited *Strong Opinions: J.M. Coetzee and the Authority of Contemporary Fiction* (Continuum, 2011); and *Reading Coetzee's Women with Melinda Harvey*, with whom she also co-edited a special issue of *Australian Literary Studies* 33.1 (2018). She is concluding a research project funded by the Australian Research Council entitled 'Rethinking the Victim: Gendered Violence in Australian Women's Writing'. She is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

Lanoi Maloiy is a Researcher and Lecturer with the African Women's Studies Centre at the University of Nairobi. She has experience in the governance and education sectors from working in various New Zealand schools and Australian higher education institutions. Lanoi completed her doctoral research on the emergence of female political leaders in Kenya. She also holds a master degree from Victoria University where she developed a thesis titled: Online communities, Gen Y and civic engagement: An investigation of youth leadership potential in the context of social and democratic issues. Outside of her career, Lanoi acted as a member of the organizing committee for the South Australian Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Gender/Women's Studies Conference held from the 18 to 19 June 2014, and served on a three-speaker panel for Australian secondary students on starting a research project. Lanoi's research interests are in the area of women and leadership in Africa. She has recently had a book chapter entitled "Tracing Kenyan Women's Involvement in Elections and Political Leadership from 1963–2002". In *Where Women Are Gender & the 2017 Kenyan Elections*. Eds Nanjala Nyabola & Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle by Twaweza communications.

Maria Martinez is Assistant Professor at the UNED, Department of Sociology III (Social Tendencies). She is also a member of GESP (Study Group on Society and Politics) from the UNED and the University Complutense of Madrid and CEIC (Collective Identity Research Center) from the University of the Basque Country where she is the editorial coordinator of its journal, *Papeles del CEIC. International Journal on Collective Identity Research*. She has been a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Santa Barbara and a visiting scholar at the GTM/CRESPPA from the University of Paris 8 and the University of Paris Nanterre (France). Her research interests are feminisms, identity, collective action, vulnerability and agency. Her work has been published in English, French and Spanish in venues such as *Hypatia*, *Women Studies International Forum*, *Patterns of Prejudice*, *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, *Pensée Plurielle*, *Recherches Féministes*, *Política y Sociedad* and *Athena Digital*. One of her last articles ("From the Subjected Subject to the Vulnerable Subject. An Unfinished Discussion in Contemporary Spanish Feminisms") was published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*.

Sonia Núñez Puente is Associate Professor in Gender and Media at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos. She has led national and international projects on feminist digital activism, gender-based violence and the image of women in the area of cultural studies. Together with the writer Lucía Etxebarria, she is co-author of *En brazos de la mujer fetiche* (2002). She has been a Leverhulme Research Fellow at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) and a lecturer at Vanderbilt University (USA). She has been a visiting scholar at the universities of Cambridge (United Kingdom) and Humboldt zu Berlin (Germany), among others. She has published in journals such as *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *Feminist Review*, *Journal of European Women's Studies* and *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*.

Cristina Peñamarín holds PhD in Contemporary Spanish History. She is Professor of Semiotics and of Information Theory at the Faculty of Information Sciences (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, UCM). She has been the director of the Discourse Studies section of the AE-IC (Spanish Association of Communication Research) since its foundation until 2016 and is a member of its Scientific Committee; Coordinator of scientific publications of the UCM from 2003 to 2005; Director of the Editorial Complutense from 2005 to 2009; Director of the UCM research group "Semiotics, communication and culture", from 2006 to 2013. Her book, *Discourse Analysis. Towards a Semiotics of Textual Interaction*, in co-authorship with Jorge Lozano and Gonzalo Abril, has had numerous reissues until the present since its publication in 1982 and has been translated into Portuguese in Brazil. She is the author of several books and articles in different languages in the areas of socio-semiotics and textual analysis, public sphere, media discourses, representations and practices of gender, communication and visual cultures.

Natalia Szablewska is based at the Auckland University of Technology Law School (New Zealand) and is Adjunct Professor at the Royal University of Law and Economics (Cambodia). She has over 15 years of experience spanning the public sector, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and academia in six countries. Natalia is a social scientist and lawyer specialising in human rights (law) and transformative justice processes. Her research centres on themes at the intersection of law, public policy and applied ethics, and she employs gender- and human rights-based approaches to examine issues relating to vulnerable populations and socio-legal (in)equalities. Natalia has published widely for academic and non-academic audiences, and her academic work has appeared in leading law and social science journals. Her edited collection on *Current Issues in Transitional Justice* (Springer, 2015) has opened an interdisciplinary debate on the meaning of 'justice' and 'conflict' in the context of transitional justice and post-conflict studies.

Louis Tozer holds a master's degree from University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies. His academic interests lie in the chaotic scenes of war and ethnic cleansing forced upon civilian populations. His research has dealt primarily with the break-up of the Former Yugoslavia and the Bosnian war. He researched the prosecution of sexual violence in war and why the ICTY was the first court to successfully convict rape as a crime against humanity. This research was completed at, and presented to The Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. Recently, he published "The Significance of the Role of Religion in the Bosnian Conflict of the 1990s: The Town of Foča as a Case Study" (Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 2016).

Anne-Marie Veillette is a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at Institut national de la recherche scientifique (Canada). She has a master's degree in Political Science and Feminist's Studies and a bachelor's degree in International Relations and International Law, both from Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada). Her researches focus on women's daily experiences of violence and infrapolitical activism in urban contexts. More precisely, she has been actively researching the matter of women and police violence in Rio de Janeiro's slums, achieving in 2017 the co-publication of "Women and the effects of pacification in Rio de Janeiro's slum: understanding the gendered effects of security policies" (*O social em questão*, 2017) and the publication of "Racialized Popular Feminism: A Decolonial Analysis of Women's Struggle with Police Violence in Rio de Janeiro's Favelas" in the journal *Latin American Perspective* (to be published). She is currently pursuing her PhD studies thanks to the doctoral scholarship Joseph-Armand Bombardier from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Virginia Villaplana Ruiz is Associate Professor of Media Studies at Murcia University, Cultural Studies at Colef Social Sciences University Baja California Tijuana, and researcher of the Institute of Communication at Autonomous University of Barcelona. Villaplana is the author of the books *Softfiction. Políticas visuales de la emocionalidad y el deseo* (Consonni), *El instante de la memoria* (Ministry of Education and Culture) and co-editor of *Cárcel, de amor. Relatos culturales sobre la violencia de género* (Reina Sofía National Museum). She is a member of the Research Network Project Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures at the European Science Foundation. Additionally, she has written a number of articles and book chapters about communication and digital memory communities in several contexts of social exclusion as working sex, prison and border. Her current research projects include feminist and queer politics in Europe and Latin America: transnational violence, social movements, resistance and social change in digital media. She is also co-editor of the academic *Journal Art and Politics of Identity*.

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1 Reframing women's victimisation

Challenges and possibilities

*María José Gámez Fuentes, Sonia Núñez Puente
and Emma Gómez Nicolau*

The intention to elaborate this volume arises in response to the communicative and political shifts experienced because of new phenomena involving civil mobilisation and participation aimed at subverting the hegemonic conceptualisation of women as victims in contexts of violence. Examining both the shifts and the phenomena that have given rise to them is vital when it comes to comprehending the current situation and the socio-political climate of the years to come. For, there are likely to be changes in the trends of political and communicative practices known until now.

Understanding gender relationships and the gender dimension in the global order forces us to speak of violence. It also obliges us to study the situations and contexts in which violence is used against women. However, dealing with the social structure and systemic logics which sustain violence has often portrayed women as victims without capacity for agency. In fact, the theory on vulnerability and agency has been presented as an oxymoron (Butler et al., 2016) according to which the condition of victim prevented individual and collective agency (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Bracke, 2016). Fortunately, social dynamics go beyond a static definition of reality: In the processes of the struggle for power, representation and the power of representation, we encounter initiatives that display non-hegemonic instances of agency by women and feminist organisations, support communities and independent movements that strive for transforming the patriarchal matrix of recognition. These all have the will and the capacity to report, rewrite and retell established gender roles, naturalised accounts of reality and sclerotised subjectivities, in an attempt to prevent the institutions and the state from monopolising the definition of the situation.

It is from that perspective that this volume is conceived: To question the notion of victim and victimisation and explore the agencies arising from individual and collective spaces and embodiments, far removed from the classical notion of the sovereign subject (Alcoff, 1988; Benhabib, 2005; Flax, 1987), capable, rational, autonomous and placed at the centre of the story. For, from this point of view, victims do not have the capacity to act and neither do vulnerable or suppressed collectives. However, according to Butler, not only is vulnerability compatible with agency, but in fact it is a

condition which offers the possibility of forms of agency and action (Butler, 2015, Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). Thus, while neoliberal literature on empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016) suggests that women and vulnerable subjects can abandon this state and become strong subjects through technologies of the self (Foucault, 2008), our proposal involves an in-depth study of the opposite, namely how through both daily and activist practices it is possible to act to resist power despite structural subjections.

In any study of the practical agency of a subordinate, vulnerable or vulnerabilised subject, there is a more or less explicit analysis of the violent structure exploiting, marginalising and harming that subject. In every action of subordinate, vulnerable or vulnerabilised subjects, there is a definition of a political subject that reacts, resists or resides in the subjections. For that reason, this volume is based on the consideration that the global disadvantage of women in a gender order (that transmits violence against them and attempts to position them as mere victims) does not imply passivity, a lack of action or acceptance of the situation. Instead, the position of subordination may channel social transformation processes which alter, subvert and challenge the violence, although not without resistance. Reference is also made to the agency actions undertaken in order to “cope” better in an oppressive system, either because they generate spaces outside the system of domination or because they redefine the identities which have been imposed upon them (Martinez, 2019, p. 4).

Attempting to reinterpret the female victim, therefore, implies a more complex understanding of the individual and collective actions carried out. Actually, it urges us to mapping nodes by means of which the situation of victimisation fuses with processes of identity construction, subjectivity and political action. It also involves leaving to one side Western-centric narratives and considerations (Adlbi Sibai, 2017) which measure the political capacity of the subjects based on Western cultural standards (economic, liberal, etc.) and which have led to the systematic revictimisation of women from the South. Finally yet importantly, it involves reviewing or questioning many of the public policies implemented as strategies which will “save” women from their situation of exploitation, oppression or violence, and the cultural artefacts that reproduce that saviour-centred approach, since safety always emanates from the state-sanctioned narrative.

Consequently, the scope of the volume *Rewriting Women as Victims: From Theory to Practice* interpellates three areas of work in order to analyse those spaces in politics, activism and cultural representations which question the traditional attributions given to female victims: Generally considered to be voiceless, in a situation of dominance or who have even developed a false consciousness according to which they do not even know that they are victims. This will enable us to explore not only the agencies produced, but also the possibilities for social transformation.

In this regard, it is worth clarifying which concept of victim we are using. Following the classic study by Galtung (1990), direct violence cannot

be understood without taking into consideration the interrelationship between direct, structural and cultural violence. As such, the frameworks of violence are applied intersectionally by means of numerous axes of oppression. From this perspective, vulnerable subjects, subjects who are victims, are no longer the others and, following Butler (2004), precariousness is not only associated with the fringes, but instead affects reality in its entirety. It becomes the norm. Vulnerability becomes part of social nature, even though it is not distributed equally (Butler, 2004; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). While precariousness is ontological in all lives, which are subject to sudden disappearance, "precarity" is the political condition which affects certain groups of people who suffer from a lack of economic and social support networks and who are more exposed to harm, violence and death (Butler, 2014). We, therefore, understand that the concept of the female victim corresponds, hegemonically, to a narrative of violence enunciated from a violent recognition (Butler, 2005) which reproduces a female identity associated with injurability (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). In this, violence is presented as something which occurs at random, which is natural and thus inalterable and which is even a consequence of the victim's irresponsibility, ignoring the structural subjection of the subjects.

It is for this reason that from our perspective, the challenge lies in devising practices and discourses which provide an alternative testimony to the place of the female subject faced with violence. Moreover, there is a need for researching into communication strategies for subjective activation that are not based on compassionate images or stories about subjects who are reified or objectified in their role as victims. In that respect, the contributions in this volume reflect on political practices which envisage the capacity for individual and collective action from a position of vulnerability; activist practices which attempt to subvert both the realities and the narratives, redefining the figure of the female victim; and communicative practices capable of recognising the victim subject as the other in its ethical dimension, that is to say whose logic of communicative interaction addresses, on the one hand, the impossibility of fully comprehending the experience of the victim (despite the force of the totalising embrace of hegemonic narratives) and, on the other, the structure of the very scene of address that the narratives generate (Butler, 2005).

Going beyond approaches based on the recognition/discovery of the female victim and the origin, causes and/or characteristics of her trauma lead us to question vulnerability and violence from the perspective of *response-ability*, understood as the capacity for response and responsibility in the response. In order to revise this conceptualisation and the theoretical, political and cultural possibilities which it could open, we turn to the theoretical concept of "ethical witnessing" of trauma studies (Kaplan, 2005; Oliver, 2001, 2004), in which responsibility is understood from the ethical commitment regarding how we articulate our response in light of the precariousness of the other. This implies a change of direction with regard to

responsibility. Commitment is then linked to the search for answers which revert the structural conditions which generate vulnerability, heal the damage and rewrite our collective memory. This takes us necessarily to enter into dialogue with Butler's notion of accountability (Butler, 2005), since in her oeuvre accountability acquires a collective dimension that takes into account the question of interdependence. From that perspective, giving account means to point out and expose the political, social and cultural dynamics that precarize us as subjects.

From the theoretical and political commitment above, the volume is divided into three sections which present the axes from which new means of representing female victims in contexts of violence are discussed. In the section on politics, the articles present some of the main challenges facing public policies and the social analysis of women's victimhood. First, the chapter by Cristina Peñamarín Beristain and Diana Fernández Romero entitled "Women survivors of sexist abuse in Spain: The role of affects of proximity and recognition on the way out" deals with the damage and recovery processes of women who survive gender violence. The analysis of the logics of interdependence and recognition of others in the construction of subjectivity is of particular relevance. To that end, the authors analysed 26 in-depth interviews of women who suffered gender violence, and this rich empirical material has enabled them to identify the fundamental role of the processes of witnessing and bearing witness in the evolution of these women.

Emma Dolan's contribution in the chapter entitled "The 'comfort women' apologies: Gender victimhood and the politics of grievability" aims principally to expose the ways in which political acts which initially sought gender justice in fact maintained and prolonged the gender order. This was the case with the Japanese state's apologetic act towards the Korean state for the Japanese army's use of Korean women as forced prostitutes during the war. The author highlights how victims are arranged in order of importance in this process, establishing the hegemonic model of recognition of the "woman-victim" which fits the feminine mandate: innocent, forced and damaged. In particular, it is worth highlighting her analysis of nationalist policies regarding the recognition of victims.

The chapter entitled "Gender, agency and the construction of a rape victim: The ICTY and the prosecution of sexual violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina" also deals with the subject of gender violence in the context of war. Louis Tozer analyses the paradoxes of the interpretation and prosecution of rape as a war crime. The text examines the process by means of which the mass rape of Bosnian Muslim women went on to constitute a specific criminal offence for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The text discusses the idea of rape as a weapon of war based on the principle that the rape of women from a particular community demoralises the male fighters under the principle of the appropriation of trauma. It is an idea which, in the case study, is reinforced by the

patriarchal myths regarding Muslim women and men from an orientalist viewpoint. One of the most noteworthy elements of the chapter is the analysis of how the prosecution of rape as a crime against humanity and preventing women from testifying in court not only led to a reified interpretation of rape but also the negation of the agency of women who were unable to bear witness to the reality they had experienced.

In the chapter entitled "Women's resistance in violent settings: Infrapolitical strategies in Brazil and Colombia", Anne-Marie Veillette and Priscyll Anctil Avoine analyse the meaning of the concept of resistance in contexts where there is a high level of violence, oppression and forms of marginalisation. Though qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Brazil and Colombia, they analyse from a feminist and decolonial perspective the practices of resistance which go beyond collective action and which, contrary to the hegemonic narrative on resistance, take place in the private sphere and are expressed through common practice. This analysis deals with the agency which arises from a position of vulnerability and which the authors situate in the framework of infrapolitics. Finally, the chapter by Olga Jurasz and Natalia Szablewska entitled "Towards transformative gender equality: The importance of addressing economic violence against women in Cambodia" deals with the importance of addressing economic violence as a fundamental form of political violence. The role of women as activists is analysed through the protests and actions they have headed regarding land dispossession and forced evictions, given their importance in order to guarantee economic and housing rights. The authors investigate how the empowerment of communities is undertaken through the fight for redistribution rights in the face of the deepest structural violence.

The section on activism deals with the communicative practices that, within the framework of activism, propose discourse or innovative practices, which challenge the hegemonic frameworks from which female victims are discerned. The chapter by Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira and Lanoi Maloiy entitled "Feminist and grassroots activism rewriting women as victims: Kenyan women's untold story" deals with the role of women and women's movements in the Mau Mau Uprising. Concretely, it explores how it helped to organise women collectively and effectively in political terms in order to resist the patriarchal system during the struggle for independence and the post-independence period in Kenya. The chapter also focuses on the possibilities for resistance based on the participation of women in policy review and constitutional change, in particular, with the strength of grassroot women's organisations. The rewriting of African women with regard to their capacity for agency is of particular interest, questioning deeply rooted stereotypes of African women as victims.

In the chapter entitled "Collective action and organisation against gender violence in Spain: When victims became activists", Maria Martinez presents a series of questions regarding the emergence of activism among victims of gender violence. It is innovative how the author changes the emphasis in