

# Living Dead: Suspended Lives during/after Gender Violence<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article takes up a distinction between two times commonly found in works on violence—the time in or during the violence and the time after the violence—and contrasts it with evidence gathered in field work conducted in Spain mainly with victims of gender violence. For these women, life *after* the violence is (or continues to be) a “living death.” With this characterization I seek to further the debate on the notion of life as perceived in sociology, bearing in mind that in that discipline life has been assumed as a given, and arguing instead that life should be understood as “making a life.”

**Keywords:** life, living death, social death, gender violence

“You’re dead in life,” “there’s no life,” “it’s not living,” “this is not even life”—these are some of the expressions heard during a qualitative field work that I conducted in Spain with women who have suffered gender violence.<sup>2</sup> I came across these expressions by chance, as life and death were not the subjects of my study. The first time one of these women referred to life as a “living death” was in a focus group I organized with five women victims of gender violence. We were discussing whether women who are victims of gender violence fit a specific typology, and talking in general about the category of victim. The discussion then veered to consider the time of the violence and life experiences in a context pierced by violence. The women described that time as a “living death”; life under violence is not life, it is a “living death.”

The same expression is used by Amelia Tiganus, a victim of sex trafficking and currently an anti-prostitution and human trafficking activist in Spain. In an interview for the online magazine *Femicidio.net*, she says: “I only awakened from that feeling of being dead in life the day I realized my story was not something personal, it was the story of many women” (2017). Life in the brothel was a “living death.” The harshness of the living conditions in the brothel prevents us from defining that situation as life; the women are biologically alive, but their life cannot be considered as such. Nevertheless, Amelia Tiganus extends the expression “living dead” beyond the time of the violence. She argues that you do not automatically get your life back when you leave the brothel. You have to look hard at your own history and work at it to “awaken from that feeling.”

“Living dead” are also the women with whom Rosa-Linda Fregoso interacted with. In her study (2017) she reproduces the words of a woman whose brother was disappeared

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<sup>2</sup> All the women who participated in this field work were victims of abuse at the hand of their partners. Most of them participate in and/or have established organizations to help other women who have also been abused. These groups focus on violence in the context of a relationship because it is the violence they suffered and that is characterized as gender violence under Spanish law (Larrauri 2007), and in Spain has garnered social, media, and political attention (Casado-Neira and Martínez 2017).

years ago in Mexico: “We’re living dead,” that woman says. She gathers the stories of this and many other women who have a disappeared relative. Here the idea of “living dead” leaves the territories of the time of the violence or the catastrophe suffered and seems to have settled elsewhere, beyond the space-time of the disappeared loved one. The life of a disappeared person’s relative is not, and will never be, life.

In all these cases, including those studied by Fregoso, it is assumed that once the woman leaves the violence, once she abandons the brothel, and once the catastrophe of the disappearance is resolved, when one completes the mourning process (Gatti 2015), life returns to *normal*. It is assumed that life becomes life again, and is no longer a “living death.” That, however, is not what I found in my research with women who have been victims of gender violence at the hands of their partners. For these women, “living death” is not—or not only—a state which characterizes the time of the violence, it is a state that continues after they leave the abusive relationship. It is not about cancelling the life that produces the violence—whether that violence comes from a husband, a pimp, or the state—, but, as another woman victim of abuse, who at the time of the interview was president of a victims’ organization, tells me: “something dead remains in life.” This woman explains how when she has to meet up with a woman to accompany her to lodge a complaint, before she is even introduced to her she can pick her out in a crowd: “You can see it in her eyes (...), because there’s a part of her that stays dead for life.”

What does she mean with “something dead remains in life”? Is it impossible to recover from what was broken by that violence? What does it mean that life can no longer be called life? What does the use of the same expression by both women victims of abuse at the hands of their partners, women trafficked, and relatives of disappeared persons tell us? Is this simply a metaphor for the harshness of a life pierced by violence and/or catastrophe? Or should we be concerned because it could be foreshadowing a new form of existence and a new conception of life? This article seeks to pose such questions in order to propose a way of understanding life when it comes close to death. Ultimately, this is meant as a modest contribution to the debate on the notion of life in the field of sociology, which has been taken for granted in that field, and is even absent from it; for sociology life is *simply* what goes on in society.

These reflections stem primarily from my empirical work with women who have been victims of violence at the hands of their partners, which I conducted in the framework of two research studies. My empirical data consists of interviews with twenty-eight women victims of gender violence and seventeen experts on the subject.<sup>3</sup> I add specific

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<sup>3</sup> The first study was a collective project entitled “Mundo(s) de víctimas. Dispositivos y procesos de construcción de la víctima en la España contemporánea” (World(s) of Victims: Victim Construction Processes and *Dispositifs* in Contemporary Spain), which looked at four paradigmatic cases (CSO 2011-22451). The project was based at the University of the Basque Country / Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea and financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under the national research and development program (Plan Nacional de I+D+i), and it was conducted from 2012 to 2015 by a large multidisciplinary and international team of researchers. The second study is my post-doctoral research, “Improbable Agencies: Collective Articulations and Mobilizations of ‘Vulnerable Women’ in Contemporary Society,” conducted in the University of California, Santa Barbara, from 2016 to 2018, with the financial support of the Basque Government’s improvement program for doctors. In the framework of the first study, David Casado-Neira and I interviewed eleven women victims of gender violence at the hands of their partners and fourteen experts, and in the second study I interviewed seventeen women victims, all members of victims’ organizations, and three experts. An important part of the reflections presented here arose from discussions and debates with the Mundo(s) de víctimas team, and from the collective research that continues that program: “Desapariciones. Estudio en perspectiva transnacional de una categoría para gestionar, habitar y analizar la catástrofe social y la pérdida”

empirical information on women trafficked for sexual exploitation purposes, drawn mainly from the media (written press and television interviews).

The text moves between two times: the time in or during the violence and the time after the violence. The first is more easily conceived: life during the violence is a “living death.” I examine the similarities and differences between various forms of violence and look, in particular, at the mandate to “go back to normal” that is found throughout situations of gender violence and emerges as an unattainable aim. That impossibility leads us to a second time: life *after* the violence, for which “living death” is also used. For this second moment sociology lacks the analytic tools to deal with situations in which the exceptional becomes permanent and the anomic becomes the norm. Given the lack of sociological tools, I turn to other fields, mainly feminist, postcolonial and cultural studies, which allow for thinking about (or articulating, at least) something that is difficult to think about from the field of sociology: that exceptional situations can become permanent, that it is possible to inhabit those situations and, in fact, people do live in them, although those lives are not what we normally consider life. I close the article with some thoughts that are not by any means intended to give a sociological definition of life, but which do invite us to move in that direction, mainly through the notion of survival.

### **“Living Death” *in* (Gender) Violence**

An important body of work has focused on exposure to death and on life when it is taken to the limit during a time of violence, in particular in situations of extreme violence. Good examples of this are the works by Primo Levi (1959) and Pilar Calveiro (2004). Although with differences, they both give accounts of extreme living conditions in spaces of exception (Agamben 2005)—the Nazi concentration camps in Levi’s case, and the clandestine detention centers (CDC) of Argentina’s last military dictatorship in Calveiro’s—and show the biopolitical work in the exposure to death of those biologically-living bodies, placing them at the limit between life and death (Irazuzta, Martinez, and Schindel 2019). They are exposed either to a direct biological death (an execution) or an indirect one (torture, food deprivation). But that exposure also entails denying elements that are essential for what is understood as life: denials that could be considered relatively harmless (being denied access to hygiene) and others that affect the core of what constitutes the subject and subjectivity (forced isolation, prohibitions against acting and talking and interacting with others near or far).<sup>4</sup>

Levi’s and Calveiro’s works refer to situations of extreme and exceptional violence, to states of exception (Agamben 2005). Is it possible to think of intimate partner violence or other forms of gender violence in the same terms as exposure to death or the denial of life that occurs in a space of exception such a concentration camp or in a CDC? This seems to be what international bodies suggest. The United Nations, for example, notes that violence against women is a form of torture (Osborne 2009), a term that is also used by an Andalusian woman victim of gender violence, who speaks of her experience as “coming out of torture.” Amelia Tiganus, the sexual exploitation victim who now fights to eradicate trafficking and prostitution in Spain, describes gender violence in similar terms, likening brothels to concentration camps (2017). Her account is alarmingly similar to Levi’s (1959), and also to Calveiro’s (2004), in terms of the description of the

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(Disappearances. A Transnational Study of a Category for Managing, Inhabiting, and Analyzing Social Catastrophe and Loss) (CSO2015-66318-P).

<sup>4</sup> For a reflection on the construction of the subject and subjectivity in situations of lives faced with death, see the article by Kirsten Mahlke, also in this issue.

everydayness of life in the space of exception. Brothels could be considered similar to concentration camps or CDCs: “We stand in line waiting for the sheets to be changed, we stand in line to file into the bar room (...), we stand in line waiting for our turn to eat, we stand in line to go into a room with a john.”<sup>5</sup>

This article does not seek to solve that issue—whether the violence in *those* spaces of exception (Agamben 2005) and gender violence are equivalent.<sup>6</sup> Rather, what I am interested in analyzing is that the idea of “living death” is posited more or less explicitly in both. In the case of gender violence, the expression is not so much meant to describe an exposure to biological death—although in these forms of violence that threat may be present more implicitly rather than explicitly<sup>7</sup>—, as it is a life that cannot be considered full, that cannot be called “good” (Butler 2015).<sup>8</sup> Life in gender violence is a cancelled life, a suspended life.

“—There’s no life. You don’t even have time to feel if you like this or if you like that; there’s just no life, there’s no life (...) You’re living in your house with that person, that’s not life, you’re there dead in life, I mean, it’s no life.

—You come home and you think: Is he going to be in a good mood? Is he going to be in a bad mood? I’m going to do this and see if he’ll take it well or if he’ll take it badly. I mean, you’re constantly thinking about the other, you immediately erase yourself, you walk in the door and you cancel yourself out, or you throw yourself into the routines of taking care of the kids, cleaning, and so on, so you’re not turning it around in your head all the time.” (Interview with two abused women, Basque Country, July 2017)

“When you’re with him, living with the abuse, that’s not life, because you can’t think, you can’t feel. I mean, it’s like... what’s the difference, if he hits me once, if he hits me twice, or...” (Interview with an abused woman, Basque Country, June 2013)

A key element is thinking that the life they are living is not a full life, that it is not a good life (Butler 2015), because that violence is seen as canceling them as subjects and breaking their subjectivity. That is how Amelia Tiganus, the trafficking victim interviewed for *Feminicidio.net* in 2017, puts it:

“Millions of women are still there, suffering a *loss of identity*, physical and psychological torture, fear, disregard, silence, indifference, neglect, and abandonment by the state and a complicit society.” (Emphasis added)

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<sup>5</sup> Interview on the program, “Salvados” broadcast by the television channel La Sexta in March 2018. Available at: [https://www.lasexta.com/programas/salvados/mejores-momentos/amelia-reta-a-la-sociedad-a-luchar-contra-la-trata-mujeres-mirame-a-los-ojos-y-escuchame-aguantalo-como-lo-hice-yo-viviendolo-te-he-hecho-complice-ahora-tu-respuesta-depnde-de-ti\\_201803115aa592d90cf2afdd12981519.html](https://www.lasexta.com/programas/salvados/mejores-momentos/amelia-reta-a-la-sociedad-a-luchar-contra-la-trata-mujeres-mirame-a-los-ojos-y-escuchame-aguantalo-como-lo-hice-yo-viviendolo-te-he-hecho-complice-ahora-tu-respuesta-depnde-de-ti_201803115aa592d90cf2afdd12981519.html).

<sup>6</sup> Rita Segato (2016) argues in favor of the need to distinguish between different forms of violence against women so as to be able to offer proper responses. More reason than to distinguish between forms of violence that are so different: that of the *lager* and the CDCs, on the one hand, and that of gender violence. The former are exceptional forms of violence, of the state of exception, the latter are found in everyday life; the first occur in the public space (although they are hidden at the time of their occurrence), the second happen in the private sphere (remaining hidden until the woman denounces it); one has an end, the other is permanent, structural.

<sup>7</sup> A common view among experts on the subject is that women who are abused by their partners do not perceive the extent of the risk they are in, despite the real possibility of physical harm, even death. This view is based on figures of women killed by their partners, considering that around one thousand women have been killed in Spain since the first data was collected in 2003.

<sup>8</sup> For Butler, biological life—“the body concerned solely with issues of survival” (2015)—cannot be separated from what we could call social life, as the former “is surely a precondition for all other claims we make” (2015), that is, for the latter.

Life is cancelled because the subject and the subject's identity are suppressed. During violence—and this is nothing new or specific to victims of gender violence—an extreme negation of the subject occurs: the subject is not allowed to be. That “not allowed to be” is effected through multiple gestures of control, some could even be considered minor, such as the ones described by these two women victims of gender violence:

—“It’s a living death because you don’t have... you can’t say what you think, you can’t...

—Speak, you can’t eat, you can’t...

—It’s just terrible, you can’t give your opinion, you can’t go shopping, you can’t say what you think, you can’t do anything... So you’re at home but you’re living in a room, and then when you hear the key turning in the lock you panic, you’re terrified.” (Interview with two victims of gender violence, Basque Country, July 2017)

This cancellation of life during the violence or the catastrophic event is not new and we can work with it using tools from different disciplines, including those of the social and behavioral sciences. From psychology, for example, we can apply cognitive-behavioral therapies and/or diagnose the victims’ ailments as post-traumatic stress syndrome (Rechtman 2005). From the social and human sciences, we can address the biopolitical *dispositifs* that generate those spaces of extreme violence (Calveiro 2004) or the social mechanisms that legitimate their use (Segato 2016), to cite just a couple of the many studies available. I am, nevertheless, interested in the expression “living death” because it is used not only for the time of the violence, but also for the time that follows. That time in which life, and with it the subject and identity, is supposedly recovered, once the woman has left the violent relationship or once she has escaped the brothel.

### **“Living Death” after Gender Violence**

#### *The (Impossible) Mandate of Going Back to “Normal” and its Sociological Architecture*

A mantra runs throughout policies and programs for women victims of gender violence, a mantra that turns into a mandate, an obligation that must be met by every woman who has decided or has been compelled to abandon gender violence. The mantra could be worded as follows: “Get out of that situation of violence and go back to normal” (Casado-Neira and Martínez 2017)—reclaim your life. I have come across many variations of this idea in the field work on which this article is based:

“They’re not disabled people, they’re people who have lived through a trauma or several traumas and they need to go back to normal.” (Psychologist of an organization that provides aid to victims, Basque Country, May 2013)

“The aim of the Integral Act against gender violence must be that, number one, victimhood has to be a temporary condition.” (Person in charge of gender violence policies in a Spanish region, June 2012)

It is a mandate that appears in the discourses of psychologists and legal experts. But it is also a discourse that has been internalized by the victims themselves as a result of their coming into contact with the *dispositifs* made available to them. This mandate of returning or going back to normal takes on two forms when victims incorporate it. The first is translated into the invitation to “reclaim the person you were,” that is, to recover the identity that violence has broken. It is something that is in occasions imagined as “being born again”:

“When that ends and you start to recover, you go back to being the woman you were, the person you were.” (Victim of gender violence, Basque Country, June 2013)

“It’s like you’re born again, you know? It has meant learning to live and learning to live for real, not what my life was like before, which I could summarize as a bad dream, that is, forty-two years of my life don’t exist, they were just a bad dream.” (Victim of gender violence, Catalonia, June 2017)

The second form tends to involve thinking in terms of “healing.” Gender violence was an illness that must be healed:

“I had a wound and it was open, and little by little it has been closing, but because I have also been healing it, because if you don’t heal yourself, if you don’t clean out all that pus, that wound will never heal.” (Victim of gender violence, Galicia, July 2013)

Not being born again, not healing the wound, not “reclaiming life and going back to normal,” are situations that not only create hierarchies among victims—those who heal and those who do not, those who are born again and those who are not, those who recover a “normal” life and those who stay in an exceptional situation—, they are ultimately seen as a failure. A failure not of the system, but a failure of the woman who suffered the violence. The responsibility of not being able to go back to normal is placed on the woman, since assistance programs have been made available to her and she has not taken advantage of them.

“A woman needs maybe two years to have a certain autonomy, and others might never be able to get there because they’ve already gone a bit mad, right?” (Person in charge of violence programs of an organization against abuses, Madrid, May 2013)

In that mantra of “going back to normal,” of reestablishing a “normal life,” neither “normal” nor “life” are defined; they are assumed. If we pay attention to what the victims say they have lost during the violence, we can find clues of what was lost and must be recovered, that is, what is seen as the essence of a “normal life”: expressing an opinion, shopping, putting on make-up, talking, running the household, taking care of the children, working, going out for a walk, spending time with friends... They are all very ordinary activities, if you like, but which frame our everyday lives and condition us in our experiences. It is not about recovering an idealized life (although these women may sometimes idealize some lives), but of reestablishing a life that is considered *simply* normal, nothing more, nothing less. Of course, underlying that conception of life that is not expressed with words is a normative notion of life held by the individuals interviewed—both experts and women—that establishes what life is like, or, rather, what it should be like. But that normative notion is not defined, it rests on the negation of an undignified life, of an ungrievable life (Butler 2004); life in violence is not life.

If among these women, life and normality—normal life—are something that is assumed, the same can be said to apply in sociology. In this discipline, life is an assumption. And an equation is built upon that assumption, equating life to normality to society. What happens *within* society is life, normal life; what is not normal, because it is not common, because it is outside the norm or because it does not even have a norm, falls *outside* society; it is not life. Violence falls outside that equation, as does death;<sup>9</sup> violence cannot form part of normal life, which is life in society, although, in fact, it does. This equation rests on a classical architecture, on many concepts of sociological thinking. From the classical concept of anomie (Durkheim 1893/1997) to other, more recent ones, such as precarity, poverty, or exclusion, the world is divided into what is

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<sup>9</sup> See the text by Kirsten Mahlke in this same issue.

inside—the normal, what is part of the norm and is regulated by a norm—and what is outside. All of these concepts, in fact, are based on the idea that the external can only be a temporary state and, therefore, the aim is to integrate it. The same is true with violence. It falls outside that architecture, it is an abnormality and, therefore, it must be temporary. When it does happen—that temporary abnormality—it must be corrected; normal life must be restored.

The way these women victims of gender violence refer to life *after* violence as “living death” suggests that normal life cannot be recovered, that a temporary state cannot be reintegrated, that the temporary and the exceptional have become permanent, that the state of exception is now the norm (Agamben 2005). In fact, we could ask ourselves if that going back to normal as an “absence” of violence is possible for women, if we understand gender violence not in its limited sense of violence at the hands of one’s partner (Larrauri 2007), but as a structural violence that affects all women to a greater or lesser extent. Perhaps normality for women is life in contexts of structural violence (Fregoso et al. 2010, Segato 2016); it is a normalized abnormality.

How can we think sociologically when the temporary, the exceptional, the anomic are normalized, when the margins occupy the center and/or merge into it,<sup>10</sup> when there is no longer an *after* the violence? Some time ago, in his studies on slavery Orlando Patterson (1982) came up with the concept of “social death.” This author understands slavery as a form of social death, because the slave exists *only* as property of another, he has no existence of his own: “in his social death, [the slave] lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and the secular” (1982, p. 51). Patterson distinguishes between two forms of social death: an intrusive form, in which “the slave was ritually incorporated as the permanent enemy on the inside” (p. 39), an outsider to the community; and an extrusive form, which corresponds to what is commonly associated with slavery, “an insider who had fallen, one who had ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in the community” (p. 39). The social death of the slave is not an exceptional situation, or it is but of a kind for which reintegration is impossible; the slave lives in a permanent exceptionality.<sup>11</sup> The situation (or violence) of slaves is not one they can leave behind, even after slavery is abolished and they are granted citizenship; it constitutes them.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the more or less classical sociological concepts (anomie, precarity, exclusion, poverty), the concept of “social death” opens up interesting possibilities for thinking about the life of these women victims of gender violence. These would be extrusive social deaths: they were a part of and they no longer belong, they have been excluded from normal participation in the community without the possibility of

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<sup>10</sup> In an earlier article coauthored with Gabriel Gatti we proposed the concept of citizen-victim as a subjective type corresponding to a time in which what was previously considered out of the ordinary (the victim) has come to occupy the center, merging with the citizen, in a fusion that is difficult to think of from sociology (Gatti and Martínez 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Michel Agier (2011) discusses situations of waiting for reincorporation that become impossible and unattainable in his studies on refugee camps, where he describes refugees as waiting-absent.

<sup>12</sup> This notion of life after violence has been reflected on in the field of African American literature. Saidiya Hartman suggests the concept of “afterlife of slavery” (2006) to refer to the violence that continues *after* slavery. While this notion can inform my discussion, especially because of the two temporalities that it distinguishes, the radical difference lies in that in the “afterlife of slavery” the continuity of life after violence is not embodied in individual as it is in the cases considered here; in the “afterlife of slavery” that continuity is structural, so to speak, allowing for the mapping of a genealogy of the racial violence of slavery in every aspect of contemporary society. I would like to thank Rosa-Linda Fregoso for bringing this literature to my attention.

reintegration, and the exceptionality of the violence has not ended with the violence, because it already constitutes them; they have to live a “living death.”

### *The Life of the “Living Dead”*

“Living death” as a description not of life *in* the violence, but of life *after* the violence should worry and concern us because it does not only affect *these* victims of intimate partner violence, or these victims and trafficked women. Neither does it affect only these and the mothers of disappeared persons with whom Rosa-Linda Fregoso works (2017). It is a term that helps us think about the lives of many other people: “These ‘living dead’ mothers remind me of the ‘invisible,’ as the Zapatistas call the poor, the *campesinos*, the indigenous people, human beings treated as ‘disposable,’ as though lacking in dignity and rights to their full humanity.” (Fregoso 2017, p. 132). There is a growing number of beings, nonhumans or not-quite-humans (Weheliye 2014), who populate the world today, exposed to forms of violence that are no longer exceptional but structural; beings who we used to refer to with categories commonly used in the social sciences—excluded, precarious, poor, vulnerable, banished<sup>13</sup>...—but for whom these categories do not quite work because they assume that theirs are temporary situations, despite reality stubbornly showing evidence to the contrary. When the catastrophe has set in and is here to stay (Gatti 2014) we need tools for thinking about and analyzing life after the catastrophe: life in and after the violence are not two distinctly separate times.

In line with Alexander Weheliye (2014), I am interested in exploring whether alternative ways of living emerge in a life that is no longer life. Weheliye criticizes Patterson’s notion of “social death” (1982), as well as the notions of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) and bare life (Agamben 1998), because they do not allow for thinking about other modes of existence. For Weheliye, slaves do have a life even if the contrary is assumed because they are categorized as or considered to be non-human. Specifically, Weheliye says that Patterson’s notion of social death “emphasizes mortality at the cost of sociality, no matter how curtailed it may be in this context, and it fails to incorporate in any significant manner the messy corporeality of bare life.” (2014, p. 31).

The work by the Brazilian anthropologist João Biehl (2013) can give us clues for exploring those alternative modes of living that emerge when (normal) life has been suspended, even devastated. Biehl has analyzed places in Brazil in which some people are literally abandoned to die. Biehl calls one of those places (Vita) an “end-point” (2013, p. 1). In Vita, there is no direct exposure to biological death, at least not apparently, there is *simply* neglect, lack of care, exposure of the people there to conditions for which the applicability of the term life is at least questionable. The people Biehl works with are biologically alive, but there is no certainty that their life can be considered a “good life” (Butler 2015) or even a normal life as understood by sociology, that is, as life in society. This author’s ethnographic work is interesting because it shows how in these places where people are left to die, where bodies are merely flesh (Spillers 1987), in these spaces of exception, these anomic spaces, there is

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<sup>13</sup> The concept of “social disappeared,” the key concept in the *Desapariciones* project, is proposed as a category for thinking about and analyzing subjects for which we lack names, beings who were never able to belong, who are inexistent. For a detailed discussion on this concept, see Gatti (2020).



life, at least everyday life in its fantastic ordinariness<sup>14</sup>: eating, sleeping, going for walks, but also chatting, playing, fighting, socializing...

Banal, minor, trivial, ordinary activities are precisely what I found in my field work with women victims of gender violence. The paradox is that these trivial activities do not refer to exceptional lives, rather they are the activities that are used to show that a “normal” has been recovered:

“So I have been able to empower myself now, and I can, more or less, run my house, I have my son, I have my own things, but...” (Gender violence victim, Catalonia, June 2017).

Are these activities enough to live? Can we consider that the ordinariness of everyday activities qualifies that living as life? What does that “but...” mean? Another woman victim of gender violence could be responding to this last question when she says:

“There is a part of you that stays dead for life, you get used to living, yeah, you get used to passing for normal, you get used to... I don’t know what, but there are things that you can never get back” (Gender violence victim, Galicia, May 2013).

The life of these women is a simulation of life, a “passing for normal,” what in our life-normality-society equation means personifying the “Mister Everybody” developed by Landowski (1993). This “Mister Everybody” is someone who “adheres so closely to the norms of the group he belongs to that through his behaviors, good habits, ways of life, great ethical and aesthetic ideals... he seems to personify it” (1993, p. 73). This entails doing what any normal citizen does: working, voicing an opinion, participating in events, besides the other activities necessary to sustain one’s own (biological) life and, sometimes, that of others. Because of that, because it is part of the language of the “Mister Everybody,” because it assumes that life is the normative notion of life, finding a definition is difficult, if not impossible. Again, life is what happens in society; indescribable because it is banal, indefinable because it is commonly assumed. This poses a double challenge for sociology, a theoretical challenge—thinking of a concept, life, that has been assumed as a given—, but a methodological challenge as well. Although in this text I focus on the first, the second challenge cannot be ignored, as the two are inseparable. In fact, it was hard for these women to give a definition when asked what life meant when they referred to life *after* the violence as “living death”. The available languages fail in these situations for which we have only recently began to invent names, and we may lack appropriate methodologies for these failures.<sup>15</sup> But let us return to our question: is recovering these minor activities enough? Are they enough for that living to be considered life? Some of the women I interviewed would answer that, no, it is not enough. One of them, a woman from the Basque Country, tells me that after “leaving” her violent partner she has not been able to get her life back. The man she had been married to is in jail, but when I interviewed her he had for some time been allowed to leave the prison for short outings and she said:

“He’s gone back to threatening me, I’m still in danger, my life is hell. It’s different from how it was when we were together, during the violence, obviously, but I don’t like it. I didn’t like it before and I don’t like it now.”

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<sup>14</sup> I reflected on this tension between the exceptionality of these abandoned lives and ordinary everydayness in a post on the *Desapariciones* project blog, at: <https://identidadcolectiva.es/victimas-desapariciones/lo-excepcional-lo-ordinario-las-formas-vida-los-sin/>.

<sup>15</sup> I thank Gabriel Giorgi for pointing out the potentially complex methodological dimension of this text. Addressing that is, as he notes, a pending task and a matter that needs to be further examined and discussed.

What makes this woman's life, and also her children's, not normal are those threats and the need to live with guards, with police protection for their safety. What worries her most is that her children, she explains, "have to live that life, which is not a good life."

The possibility of a "good life" is precisely what Judith Butler reflects on in a 2015 lecture in which, in Adorno's wake, she asks: "Can one lead a good life in a bad life?" Butler discusses why in order to think about the "good life" one needs to focus not only on the adjective (good) but also on the noun (life). According to Butler, "how do I endeavour to lead a good life if I do not have a life to speak of, or when the life that I seek to live is considered dispensable, or is in fact already abandoned? (...) the question, how do I live a good life?, presumes that there are lives to be led; that is, that there are lives to be recognized as living and that mine is among them" (2015). Butler does not solve this dilemma, nor does she provide a closed definition of life, but her question invites us to examine that notion.

### **Living, Surviving, Outliving: Some Closing Thoughts to Contribute to the Debate on the Notion of Life in Sociology**

Life, the life of these women and that of many other women, as Fregoso (2017) reminds us, which is no longer life as it has fallen outside the equation of life-normality-society that sustained it, is now an interrogation, is no longer a given. If "living death" is no longer life as we conceived it, we can posit that it constitutes a new form of life. The notion of survival can help us think about that new form of life and give us some elements to help us think about life when it is a "living death." The first element is that surviving no longer has to tend toward death. As Derrida notes with respect to the notion of survival: "I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates survival on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life." (2004, n.p.). Survival and "living death" are not to be thought of in terms of death, but in terms of the production of other forms of life.

Some studies that use the concept of survival give us clues to think precisely about those other forms of life. Gabriel Giorgi (2017), for his part, does so based on Derrida, distinguishing between surviving (*super-vivencia*) and outliving (*sobre-vivencia*). The first is *zoé*, biological life; the second is more than biological life, it is "living *beyond* what is allowed" (2017, p. 253); living, even when that life is negated or not acknowledged, even when it is not part of the life-normality-society equation. Beuret and Brown make a distinction that is similar to Giorgi's when they speak of "bare survival," that is, mere biological survival in contrast to a survival that takes into account social relations (2017, p. 333). I am not interested in the discussion—which Butler would argue against (2015)—on that distinction between a more biological life and a more social life. Rather, I am interested in the fact that both Giorgi and Beuret and Brown open up the possibility of thinking about life when what sustained it has been broken. Anne Lowenhaupt Tsing also works in that direction when she asks about the possibility of life in the ruins of capitalism (2015). All of these authors discuss how to think about life when we can no longer seize onto what constituted life as such, and they give us ideas to further explore forms of life under situations of catastrophe, violence, and ruin; when (normal) life has been shattered.

To that end, they do not cling to a reading in two times: the time *in* or *during* the violence and the time *after* the violence. On the contrary, they argue that life today—which is life after the death of LGBT communities in Giorgi's work, after the zombie-

scape in Beuret and Brown, or after the crisis of capitalism in the Anthropocene in Tsing—must not be thought of as a rupture with the past, but as its continuity. In that way, for Beuret and Brown (2017), survival entails salvaging what remains of that life so that it may function again, but that getting it to function again is no longer ruled by the same parameters. Thus, life after the violence no longer means denying that violence, it entails building a life with what is left; it is not about erasing the past (as the mandate of “going back to normal” would appear to suggest), it is rather about living with it.

There is something crucial in this proposal and it is that in that time *after* (death, violence, capitalism, the Holocene...), life no longer belongs to the grammar of being, it belongs to the grammar of doing; it can no longer be a given, something that is taken for granted as being. That is the proposal of the authors that work on the Anthropocene. Donna J. Haraway (2016), for example, proposes that life today must be made, and it has to be made with other radicals, in strange and unexpected alliances with human and nonhuman beings. Or Tsing, who warns that in living *after* capitalism we must “make worlds” (2015, 22) in the ruins that remain. That is also what Beuret and Brown propose from a very different register (the analysis of the zombie-scape depicted in the television series *The Walking Dead*), showing that life is “making a life” (2017, 338), salvaging what was left, manufacturing something new from those remains.

It is what these women victims of gender violence do: they are making a life by trying to salvage—which is not to say put back together—what is left of the life before the violence, what is left of their identity; they “make a life” with the remains of (and sometimes against) that life/identity. Perhaps “living death” is simply life when it is assumed that life is not a given and that it has to be made (collectively) by salvaging what is left, simulating the past model, but knowing that it is a simulation and nothing more, trying to invent a life that still has no form, that is yet to be conceived; living without reference points.

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