estado de wonderbra: entretejiendo narraciones feministas sobre las violencias de género

Barbara Biglia and Conchi San Martín (editors), Virus Editorial, Bilbao, 2007, 302pp., ISBN 978-84-96044-88-3, €25

Few visitors to Spain will fail to notice the relatively high visibility of cases of violence against women in the media compared to the UK. Public concern about the issue led the Spanish parliament to pass the 'integrated law for protection against gender violence' in 2004. Yet in Spain, as elsewhere, gender-based violence remains widespread. Thirty years after the country's transition from military dictatorship to liberal democracy, *Estado de wonderbra* brings together reflections on gender violence by Spanish and international academics, activists and other professionals. The chapters cover topics including the law, media representations, women's experience of drug use, prison and mental health services and gender violence in activist movements. If the result is a somewhat uneven handling of a complex and wide-ranging issue, a number of the contributions nonetheless highlight the challenges feminists are facing in confronting gender-based violence in contemporary Spain and elsewhere.

As the editors argue in their introduction, and as Débora Bertisy Nadali and Ángel J. Gordo López demonstrate in their chapter entitled 'To hide by showing', the high profile given to 'gender violence' in the Spanish media does not necessarily signal progressive change. In fact, sensationalist media reporting of high-profile cases tends to reduce gender violence to domestic violence, locating it within the private sphere and emphasising the socially marginal or pathological character of both victims and aggressors. Correspondingly, two aims of the book are to broaden the definition of gender violence beyond domestic violence and to interrogate popular stereotypes of those most directly affected by it.

The book both builds upon and critiques some basic assumptions of second-wave feminist approaches to violence against women, in particular the tendency to emphasise women's supposedly innate femininity and the emphasis on women's entry into positions of power (what in Anglo-American feminist discourse would be called 'liberal feminism'). The book's departure from the historical emphasis on domestic violence is reflected in chapters that locate gender violence on the street, at work, in prisons and psychiatric institutions, on TV and in the press. The move away from essentialism is reflected in

many of the authors' use of poststructuralist feminist and queer theory, most notably the works of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault.

The frequent reference to these and other international theorists, and the inclusion of chapters by UK-based activists and academics, demonstrate the extent to which contemporary debates about feminism, gender, sexuality and violence in Spain are constructed within a transnational framework. The chapter by Erica Burman on domestic violence, 'race' and asylum in Britain is a good contribution on its topic, but I would have liked to see a chapter on the relationship between gender violence, racism and migration in Spain, a country with a very different history of migration and race relations to the UK. Ironically, the chapter by Burman and that by Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Angela Y. Davis on women and prison in the US actually serve to highlight the lack of attention to race and ethnicity in much of the rest of the book, though the chapter by Elixabete Imaz and Teresa Martín-Paloma on migrant and Roma women in Spanish prisons serves as a valuable comparison to Bhavnani and Davis.

Although the editors are at pains to insist that 'gender' not be reduced to 'women', and the volume does include an interview with a transgender woman on her experiences as a Latin American migrant to Spain, the bulk of the book focuses on violence against women by men. One notable difference from earlier Spanish feminist work on gender violence, however, is the impressive contribution of a number of male authors. Jordi Bonet i Martí's chapter, drawing on queer theory in particular, is a useful critique of the contradictions and limitations of the 2004 law and Guillermo Rendueles Olmedo makes two interesting historical interventions: the first on women's incarceration in mental health institutions during the Franco regime and the second on leftist silence surrounding the murder of Hélène Legotien by her partner of 30 years, the prominent French Communist philosopher Louis Althusser.

It is one of the strengths of *Estado de wonderbra* that it refuses the 'theory/practice' divide by integrating stories of activism and life narratives alongside academic analysis. The notorious case of Althusser is complemented by an earlier chapter, written by the editors, on 'politically correct' abusers, that is, the problem of gender violence in social movements and left organisations. It is in this chapter that the real dilemmas for feminists come to the fore. Echoing a growing literature on gender violence in activist circles (much of it on the internet or in zines), Biglia and San Martín condemn the hypocrisy of progressive activists who all too often treat gender violence as a personal issue between two people or even portray the abuser as a victim. But they also stress the psychological and political contradictions faced by female activists who struggle to speak out against abusive fellow activists: the message that a 'good' feminist and activist is strong, independent and confident and should not allow someone else to take advantage of her. Indeed, a long-standing problem for feminist activists has been precisely how to act in solidarity with victims of gender

violence without reducing them to one of two extremes, either privileged symbols of sexism or weak women. If this book is not entirely able to avoid this dilemma, it nevertheless makes a convincing case that the struggle against gender violence remains a feminist priority, in Spain and elsewhere.

Carrie Hamilton
The University of Roehampton

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