

Gendered suffering and the complexities of keeping silent¹

Puleng Segalo

Department of Psychology, University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa
and Graduate Center, City University of New York

Abstract

Reliving the past in everyday life may function as a constant reminder of an individual's past traumatic experiences, and if the person is not offered space in which to deal with these memories, silencing persists. Many people who lived through colonisation and other oppressive regimes carry what scholars refer to as "hidden transcripts": secret histories or experiences that go unrecounted. Lack of power and inequalities within various societies lead to the silencing of some people's voices. With the advent of democracy and the Gender Equality Commission in South Africa, one would imagine that the silence would be broken; however, many stories (those of women in particular) remain unheard. The role played by gender in our quest to understand people's experiences of suffering in post-conflict situations has largely been unresearched. Many women existed and many continue to exist within oppressive systems, and it is therefore crucial to acknowledge their social suffering as women first and foremost. By talking about suffering in general and universalising terms, we run the risk of "re-colonising" these women and their experiences. In this article, I invite a critical re-thinking of how we understand suffering as it relates to both the individual and the collective, and call for the acknowledgement of gender as a unit of analysis.

Introduction: suffering

Suffering is inextricably linked to the notions of voice and silence (Morris 1997). Most oppressed people are silenced through not being given a platform to voice their experiences. Morris (1997:27) argues further that "suffering is voiceless in the metaphorical sense that silence becomes a sign of something ultimately unknowable. It implies an experience not just disturbing or repugnant but inaccessible to understanding". Van Hooft (1998:13) makes the observation that suffering refers not "just to maladies, pains, and difficulties with which we can and should cope. It involves crises and threats that constitute a degradation or alienation of our being".

Those who experience suffering usually have difficulty in communicating what they are going through, and this is exacerbated if people exist within a system that does not allow them the space to express themselves. In the context of conflict, it is usually women who are silenced. Morris (1997:28) asserts that, "A loss of voice, further, proves to be almost built-in to the interpersonal structure within which suffering usually occurs." For people who experience prolonged suffering, conflict or oppression, learnt helplessness and withdrawal may be a coping mechanism.

Suffering should be understood in its broad sense as encompassing more than physical pain, and including situated, social, embodied, and shared experience of what is painful, traumatic and hurtful both physically and psychologically. It is important for people to be given space to "voice" their layers of suffering and a platform to remember and rehearse the voices and the silences, and to be allowed to express their experiences in their own language so that they may re-story these in the hope of moving forward.

Reliving the past in everyday life may function as a constant reminder of an individual's past traumatic experiences, and if the person is not offered space in which to deal with these memories, silencing persists. Many people who lived through colonisation and other oppressive regimes carry what scholars refer to as "hidden transcripts": secret histories or experiences that go unrecounted. Lack of power and inequalities within various societies lead to the silencing of some people's voices. With the advent of democracy and the Gender Equality Commission in South Africa, one would imagine that the silence would be broken; however, many stories remain unheard. The role played by gender in our

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quest to understand people's experiences of suffering in post-conflict situations has largely been unresearched. Many women existed and many continue to exist within oppressive systems, and it is therefore crucial to acknowledge their social suffering as women first and foremost. By talking about suffering in general and universalising terms we run the risk of "re-colonising" these women and their experiences. In this article, I invite a critical re-thinking of how we understand suffering as it relates to both the individual and the collective, and call for the acknowledgement of gender as a unit of analysis. I focus on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as one of the means of giving space for re-thinking suffering and making hidden transcripts public; however, I also consider the problematic nature of the commission's "gender-blindness".

Amnesty commissions: space for voice or theatre of exclusion?

Some worry about the focus on the "exceptional", "extreme" and "gross" acts of human rights violation, which runs the risk of obscuring, or worse, of normalizing the ordinary, daily, routine acts of apartheid's structural violence: the legal, medical, economic, bureaucratic, and commercial violations of human rights that alienated millions of South Africans from their property, their homes, their families, their labor, their citizenship, and even their own bodies (Scheper-Hughes 1998:127).

There are various ways in which societies have tried to look for ways to remember, acknowledge and move forward after a national conflict. One such means is the amnesty commission, of which a South African example is the TRC. Popkin and Bhuta (1999) argue that "most transitional regimes have enacted far reaching amnesties for those accused of human rights and humanitarian law violations, citing a need to move beyond the past, reconcile societal differences, and avoid the lengthy, divisive public trials that prosecutions would entail". However, in this context, Scheper-Hughes (1998) asks: whose pain is privileged? And whose suffering is ignored? In considering amnesty commissions, it is crucial to think about how decisions are made with regard to whose voice is given privilege.

Shortly after its unbanning in 1990, the African National Congress (ANC) called upon the apartheid government to set up a "Commission of Inquiry or a Truth Commission into all violations of human rights since 1948" (Manjoo 2004:9). Following negotiations and lengthy investigative processes based on the experiences of other countries in Europe and Latin America (e.g. Chile) that had gone through similar conflict situations, it was decided to establish a truth and reconciliation commission. Its focus, however, was at the macro level, encompassing national healing and forgiveness.

One of the first things to take note of regarding the TRC is the composition of the committees that made up the commission. The process was conceptualised predominantly by men, and the absence of a specific focus on issues of gender implied a gender-neutral process. As Olckers (1996:61 cited in Manjoo (2004)) points out, "Women had not participated in their own voices in the period leading up to the drafting of the TRC bill, or in the drafting of the bill itself. Some would argue women's experiences had largely been defined out by the terms of the bill". Manjoo (2004:12) explains that the TRC "was legally established in 1995 as a quasi-judicial body which had as its principal objectives the promotion of national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past". The staff consisted largely of whites and mainly of men, yet it was promoted as being representative of the South African nation as a whole. However, as Opotov (2001:162) warns, "it is not enough to simply bring people into the process of creating joint meaning when meaning is constrained by a dominant position that defines 'what is' and what happened". The continued placement of whites, and more specifically white men, in positions of power highlights the patriarchal nature of South African society, even after the advent of democracy.

Drawing on Latin American contexts of *testimonio*, Leslie (2001:55) asserts that "through the process of giving testimony, women have the opportunity to challenge entrenched power structures and to rebuild the moral and social order for themselves and for their communities". Echoing Leslie to some extent, Summerfield (1995:26) states that "the collated testimonies of survivors could be part of a kind of grassroots history, a counter to the official accounts generated by those with power to abuse and thus a public validation of their suffering". However, it is crucial to acknowledge that owing to their place in society, among other things, the experiences of men and women and the extent of their suffering cannot be said to be the same. Even though women were offered the opportunity to come forward and share their experiences of suffering, many remained silent. Many continue to exist at the periphery, which leads to ongoing silence and delayed processes of healing; they carry with them what Liem (2007) calls "private memories" of suffering. It could be argued that some feel that they have not been given a safe enough platform to have their experiences heard and acknowledged, and that their healing is thus compromised.

One of the potentially problematic contentions of the TRC was that the nation must forgive and forget the past so that all could heal and move forward. This “all-encompassing” view of healing assumed that everyone in the nation experienced the same suffering and that they would be able simply to let go of it. The role played by gender in the healing process of a nation was not an integral part of what the TRC focused on, although there was an attempt to have “women’s issues” included in the proceedings. This should have been a crucial point to focus on, as the oppression of men and women occurs at different levels. This “gender blindness” has been noted by a number of scholars who wrote about and interrogated the TRC process (cf Van Schalkwyk 1999, 2000, 2001; Manjoo 2004 and Motsemme 2004, among others).

Popkin and Bhuta’s (1999:101) assertion that “victims whose injuries are not acknowledged and whose dignity is not fully restored are unlikely to be reintegrated into society” is instructive in helping us understand the role that being silenced plays in people’s redefinition of themselves after a long period of conflict. As Lykes (1997:727) points out, “the self-silencing within the population complements and reinforces the government’s ‘official story’, making it nearly impossible to recognize what is happening”. As many people, more specifically women, continue to suffer in silence, the “illusion” that the past is forgotten and healing has taken place will continue to be the official discourse.

Black women in South Africa were excluded from many aspects of society. Opatow (2001:156) contends that “in moral exclusion, denial that excludes others is evident in such symptoms as dehumanization”. By being denied access to resources and freedom of movement, many women suffered moral exclusion. Opatow suggests that narratives of the past may not be easily recollected; however, for reconciliation to take place, these narratives should be allowed space in the present. Because the TRC did not offer enough space for women to share their narratives, it could be argued that for some of them reconciliation has yet to take place. While the TRC was established and offered as a strategy for breaking the silence, it did not offer a safe enough space for many women to feel free to share their experiences.

In their paper on the TRC and healing of individuals and the reconciliation of the South African nation, De la Rey and Owens (1998) question the inclusiveness of the process. Using a social constructivist framework, these authors argue that it is crucial to acknowledge people’s narratives and the construction of the personal experiences which are influenced by the social context within which they exist. Many researchers and mental health professionals consider that allowing people to testify constitutes a form of therapy in which those directly affected are given an opportunity to describe and share their traumatic experiences. However, because of the public nature of truth commissions, sharing what may be personal, painful, and for some even shameful experiences might not be an easy or personally desirable task. On being offered a space in which to voice their experiences, women take a chance when expressing what the past meant for them both as individuals and as a collective. The TRC offered only limited space and opportunity for this articulation. Moreover, people’s personal memories of hurtful historical pasts are trivialised when the state/government seeks and focuses on national healing while disregarding individual experiences. This may lead to a “controlled” form of remembering which does not take into account the differences between types of suffering experienced by individuals, and the particular contexts in which the suffering is experienced.

Silence and the gendering of suffering

We want history to be told and these women honored for the role they played. Their stories and the story of this country's painful history are intertwined. If history is to be fulfilled, women's contribution to the struggle acknowledged, the democracy we are building must not leave them aside on the margins (Madlala 1996).

De la Rey and Owens (1998) assert that people’s memories and understanding of their experiences is usually mediated through language. Lykes (1997:727) argues that “silence is often an adaptive, survival strategy. However, at the same time, it exacerbates people’s feelings of isolation”. There is often a failure or absence of language that people can use to recount their traumatic experiences, and without this language, silence persists. This silence, however, does not translate into loss of memory of the experienced trauma.

Manjoo (2004) highlights the importance of taking race and gender into consideration when dealing with post-conflict suffering and healing. South Africa continues to go through the process of restructuring, and women continue to suffer and to be deprived of basic rights in a patriarchal society. Within the context of reconciliation, Sampson (1993 as cited in Opatow (2001:162)) argues that “parties with little power can be disadvantaged. Their sense of what happened may be silenced, they

may not be heard on their own terms, and as a result, their interests, needs, and the outcomes they desire may have little influence on the reconciliation process even though they are nominally included in it.”

Even though the apartheid regime in South Africa was oppressive of all women, it was particularly oppressive of black women. Many lost their children and husbands through police brutality. Many watched helplessly as their loved ones were forcibly taken from them, never to be seen again. Crenshaw (1989), in her discussion of the challenges of inequality and women’s gender consciousness, asserts that women of colour are “caught at the intersection”, and that they struggle not only because they are women, but also because they are black. In the words of McEwan (2003:756):

Without spaces for the articulation of memory, black women’s citizenship, in terms of social standing and belonging, continues to be compromised. The role of women’s personal testimony in shaping the nation and citizenship is particularly important in a country such as South Africa, where the legacies of colonialism and apartheid have effectively silenced black women’s voices.

This idea is also articulated in Yuval-Davis’s (1993:9) assertion that “among subordinated and minority women, there is a realisation that to fight for their liberation as women is senseless as long as their collectivity as a whole is subordinated and oppressed”. In her work on feminist jurisprudence, Mackinnon (1989) stresses that one of the ways in which women were silenced throughout the years was by being denied the vote. Because women were silenced for so long, the law as created by men (specifically white men) did not make provision for women’s needs or rights.

Many women were and are still involved in social movements, and through their actions they are offered a space to share their experiences with collective others. By being shared with other women, their experiences move from being individualised to shared collective experiences. However, many continue to exist within patriarchal systems and therefore run the risk of continued silence. Kiguwa (2006:16) acknowledges that “post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed an increased liberalisation of traditionally oppressive gender norms (for example, patriarchy) and their effects in the lives of many women”, and argues that for women to be able to change their personal circumstances and those of others in society, they must acknowledge their ability to act and bring about change.

While it may be useful for women to have this acknowledgement, if they are not afforded a sufficiently safe space in which to work towards bringing about this change, then silence will continue and suffering will persist. Many will continue to carry with them the private and hurtful memories of the past. The way in which commissions such as the TRC treat women’s issues could provide the answer to the question of why many women remain silent. Furthermore, the trauma that women experience may carry with it feelings of shame (in the case of rape, for example); this burden is carried silently by many, for speaking or resisting may lead to punishment. In such a case, the silence becomes “chosen”, as women use it for self-protection.

Conclusion

Women are still among the majority of the vulnerable populations throughout the world who continue to be oppressed. They suffer in the patriarchal institutions within which they exist, through, for example, domestic violence and various forms of abuse. Because women continue to exist at the margins, access to power and individual rights remain an imagined, distant future that many can only hope for. With globalisation as the dominant trend, women remain at the periphery; they continue to be *spoken for* and *represented*. In this context, change is difficult to foresee.

When thinking about the role that women can play and the space they may occupy we need to shift our focus to agencies such as the United Nations, which in February 2011 established UN Women. In her inaugural address, the newly elected executive director, Michelle Bachelet, made the following observations:

The decision to establish UN Women reflects global concern with the slow pace of change. It is no longer acceptable to live in a world where young girls are taken out of school and forced into early marriage, where women’s employment opportunities are limited, and where the threat of gender-based violence is a daily reality – at home, in the street, at school and at work.

The neglect of women’s rights means the social and economic potential of half the population is underused. In order to tap this potential, we must open up spaces for

women in political leadership, in science and technology, as trade and peace negotiators, and as heads of corporations (Bachelet 2011).

This may be perceived as a step in the right direction, provided that there is movement from policy statements to action, and away from decisions that are made strictly at the macro level with disregard for the contribution or voices of those at the micro level. Women have for a long time played a crucial role in nation building in countless ways: at the social level (by looking after the elderly, the sick and children); at the cultural level (by socialising children into society); at the political level (by being actively involved in numerous consciousness-raising movements that led to the fall of many oppressive and colonial structures); and at the economic level (by being involved in sustainable development community programs, e.g. in agriculture). It therefore becomes vital to acknowledge the role that women have played and continue to play in globalisation. Yet because of their lack of access to “power,” their contribution remains unnoticed.

When we theorise within our various disciplines, we need to critically engage and acknowledge the various contextual aspects that affect people’s lives. Questions of power and domination have for a long time been disregarded from within a psychological perspective, and as Apfelbaum (2009) argues, we cannot claim to represent all if many people remain marginalised, silenced and oppressed by the way we speak and write about them. Silence is internalised when people are not offered a space to express their social and personal suffering and pain. This in turn becomes a form of self-oppression, which creates barriers to dealing with the memories and moving on through the healing process. Offering release to silenced voices might lead to a promotion of “greater self-understanding and even healing” (Liem 2003:16). De La Rey and Owens (1998) define healing as a journey that has a starting point, is continuous in nature and has no “set” destination. May the journey begin.

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