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# Celebrities, gender-based violence and women’s rights: towards the transformation of the framework of recognition?

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** Due to the limitations of the current framework of recognition of gender-based violence, this article analyses the possibilities of the actions performed by celebrities in the transformation of such framework and in the fight for women’s rights. To this end, we propose the concept of “ethical witnessing”. **Methods.** The study proposes an analytical model based on the operationalisation of this concept applied to the examination of the representational practices that may destabilise the current hegemonic configuration and re-signify the subject-victim relationship of violence. The four dimensions of analysis are: the relations generated between the subject-victim and the witness; the degree of transgression of the reified representational models of the subject-victim; the focus on agency; and the connection with women’s fights for their rights and other social movements. This model is applied to three case studies: Beyoncé’s musical performances; the interview with actress Carmen Maura, and Emma Watson’s #HeForShe media campaign. **Results.** The study discusses the possibilities of the discursive practices stemming from postfeminist principles. A new image emerges to contrast the image of women as victims: the image of successful women who find a balance between feminist vindications and the fight against gender-based violence with consumerism, materialism and capitalism. This image enables the destabilisation of the narrative about violence, but it does not constitute a re-signification of the framework of recognition, as it can be co-opted by the “celebrity economy”, can be absorbed by liberal feminism, or can be

disassociated from the collective fight, which complicates the comprehension of the shared nature of vulnerability.

### **Keywords**

Gender-based violence, ethical witnessing, victimisation, popular culture, celebrities, post-feminism.

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## **1. Introduction**

Few social phenomena have a space in popular culture as important as gender-based violence. Rape, domestic violence, sexual abuse and many other problems that reflect the vulnerability of women in private and public spaces are a classic theme in the collective imagination: horror, war and drama movies, television series (notably crime and forensic based dramas), advertising, programmes and newscasts that document gender-based violence. These narratives are characterised for their construction of the subject-victim relationship of violence that has been reified for its media consumption: on the one hand, it enables its identification as gender-based violence –in its identification with violence against women– but, on the other hand, complicates its reading from a political position that involves subverting the structural axes of oppression in which the contexts of violence are articulated. The representational canon, thus, is characterised by its separation of gender-based violence from feminist fights for rights and the promotion of freedoms (Marugán-Pintos and Vega, 2002; De Miguel-Alvárez, 2003), individualises the responses and victimises women once again, ontologises violence and denies women’s agency (Fernández-Romero, 2008; Faulkner and MacDonald, 2009; Gámez-Fuentes, 2012; Gámez-Fuentes and Núñez-Puente, 2013; Núñez-Puente and Fernández-Romero, 2015).

In the challenge of subverting, resisting and destabilising the existing frameworks established to understand gender-based violence, this article reviews the proposals of the theoretical concept of “ethical witnessing” (Oliver, 2001; 2004; Kaplan & Wang, 2004; Kaplan, 2005; Wessels, 2010) to articulate a paradigm that provides not only an ethical dimension but also a political dimension to the representation of gender-based violence in the various genres of popular culture. Given the conceptual possibilities, we propose a model of analysis applicable to the representations of gender-based violence in these genres. On this occasion, we present the application of the model to the

reality surrounding female celebrities who use their privileged position to support the feminist fight, to defend women's rights and to put an end to gender-based violence.

The study has two objectives: to present the potentialities of the analytical model built around the concept of “ethical witnessing” –which can be applied to different audiovisual genres [01]– and to apply the model to the study of public figures and their feminist movements and fights against gender-based violence. The field of studies known as “celebrity feminism” places us on the discussion of post-feminism as media sensibility (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; 2009).

### **1.1. The hegemonic discourse on gender violence and its configuration through popular culture**

The central criticism of feminist communication studies over the modes of representation of gender-based violence is the persistent associations between masculinity and violence and between femininity and victimisation. In this way, women's bodies are objectified as something that can be hurt, damaged, used and even annihilated (Cucklanz, 2013). Female identity is defined by its intrinsic vulnerability or “injurability” (susceptibility to be wounded), in the words of Butler and Athanasiou (2013). In general, narratives about gender-based violence do not explore the skills and abilities needed to escape violence, the strategies to resist it and the fights to survive traumatic experiences and to subvert the structures that promote the inequalities and oppressions to which women are subjected. These discourses consistently deny women's agency (Butler, 2011). The naturalisation of the woman-victim relationship acquires a sinister tone in the media as it offers a reductionist image of women as in need of (patronising) protection –instead of participation and equality (Miller, 2004; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013)– and can stimulate the morbid and voyeuristic instinct of the spectator, specifically, through graphic scenes of violence against women (Projansky, 2001; Zecchi, 2006). In this way, the media may be (consciously or unconsciously) contributing, through their representations, to the existence of violence against women, while unifying the experiences of violence (Núñez-Puente and Fernández-Romero, 2015), preventing the understanding of the heterogeneity of the social conditions in which violence is experienced.

This hegemonic framework of recognition that is articulated in popular culture, however, transcends the representational framework. In the case of the Spanish State, the legislative advances that positioned it as a pioneer in European public policy (after the unanimous approval of the Law 1/2004 on Integrated Protection Measures Against Gender-Based Violence) have been criticised for simplifying the complexity of gender-based violence through various strategies: it subsumes gender-based violence to domestic violence (Marugán Pintos, 2012, García-Selgas and Casado-Aparicio, 2010) and *essentialises* the concept of gender so that it is assumed that women would be subjected to an identity-building process –given that gender would only affect them– while men would be naturalised, depriving ‘gender’ off its relational, historical and changing character (Connell, 2009). The stereotyped image of men as using violence to maintain domination hinders the analysis of the plurality of *violences* that result of the contemporary imbalances, worries and anxieties (Casado-Aparicio, 2012) exacerbated by transformations in gender relations as well as the deepening of the inequalities that obstructs access to the hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity.

Thus, the modes of recognition of gender-based violence in popular culture, the legislative practice and the design of public policies fail to recognise and address the basis of violence –the weight of the

relations of exploitation in the areas of productive and reproductive work and sexuality (Jonásdóttir, 1993), the fragility of the social bond (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), the social inequalities and frustrations (Kimmel, 2013), and the intersections and configurations of patriarchy with other axes of oppression and inequality (Platero, 2012). Public policies have prioritised the development of police and judicial technologies, which are understood as the main tools for combating gender-based violence and have an impact on the consideration of the subjects-victims of violence as lacking agency, which can only be restored through the action of the State (Gámez-Fuentes, 2012, 2013). This process also occurs in the hegemonic and patriarchal narratives of popular culture in which the subject-victim remains adrift until it is rescued by the system (Bullock, 2015; Brunson, 2013).

The identity construction of the subject-victim of gender-based violence is, thus, based on inclusions, exclusions, and neglecting. The framework of recognition builds a subject of rights that is recognised through patronising representations that relate it to accentuated femininity, dependence and vulnerability, but at the same time excludes everything on the fringes of or outside of this identity construction: women who do not fit the pattern nor the hetero-norm, because they are prostitutes or seem to be independent (Osborne, 2009; Gámez Fuentes, 2012), and women who are blamed for not following the script established by the institutions, ignoring the fact that public policies, which are based on the unitary consideration of the subject-victim, stigmatise persons located in particular situations (Larrauri, 2003; Maqueda-Abreu, 2007; Lombardo and Rolandsen, 2016), and disregard multiple contexts in which violence occurs.

## **1.2. Ethical witnessing to transform the hegemonic paradigm**

After addressing the criticism against media's representations, it is necessary to ask ourselves how shall the issue of violence against women in popular culture be addressed to avoid the problems outlined above and to be able to work towards a paradigm shift that will favour the eradication of the inequalities that cause the systemic violence? On the other hand, it is necessary to investigate how can we withstand the vicissitudes of victimisation and simplification, while we are committed to a dialogue about the relationship between vulnerability and the female subject (Kaplan 2005; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). In the words of Felman, it is imperative that we act "as a cultural [and political] witness who turns trauma as experience into insight and whose innovative concepts [can provide] new tools with which to think" (Felman, 2002: 8). In our opinion, one of those tools to rethink these issues is the concept of "ethical witnessing" in its double dimension, i.e., taking into account both the testimony of people who narrate their traumatic experiences as well as the place of the witness who listens to the testimony.

For Oliver (2001, 2004), it is not enough to show the horror of violence and of damaged bodies to denounce (Sontag, 2003; Kaplan and Wang 2004; Kaplan, 2005), or to create individual accounts that singularise the acts of violence and present them as unusual and isolated events (Radford, 2006: 666; Messuti, 2015). While these models have revealed the consequences of violence, to de-naturalise it and to show the suffering makes it difficult to articulate a political response that addresses the foundations of gender-based violence: the inequalities and oppressions that hinder the life of subjects in contexts of growing uncertainty and vulnerability. The challenge is to overcome the recognition/discovery of the subject-victim and the origin, causes and characteristics of the trauma [02] in order to recognise the subject-victim as *Other* in its ethical dimension. This shift has

two important implications in relation to responsibility: on the one hand it involves assuming our responsibility in the way we denounce gender-based violence and the way we participate in the production of the testimony of victims and, on the other hand, assuming our responsibility towards the *Other* and ourselves in order to articulate a response within the political dimension since the reception.

With regards to the first, the concept of ethical witnessing refers to the need to go beyond recognition. We recognise through our frames of cognition so we only recognise what is familiar to us. In this limited recognition we would find what is called ethical violence in Butler's work: when, in the name of our schemes of cognition and action, which are founded on a given place of the social structure, we judge based on these parameters. The value judgment, according to Butler (2009), does not found an ethical relationship nor involves recognition but, in fact, acts as a fast track to formulate an ontological difference between judge and judged. In this sense, the subject-victim that is built as a commodity acquires identitary features that are objectified in terms of their vulnerability, dependency and lack of agency, which become easily identifiable with otherness. The question "why does the victim endure?" which is very persistent and recurrent in popular discourse, reflects the limited or partial recognition of the reality of abuse that leads to ethical violence: by imposing our patterns of cognition, we put the blame on the Other. Going beyond recognition means questioning the epistemic position from which we articulate recognition. For Oliver, the dichotomy between subject and *Other* and between subject and object is, in itself, a pathology of oppression, since it enables the dehumanisation inherent in oppression and domination (Oliver, 2001: 3). Going beyond recognition implies, therefore, recognising the subjectivity of victims without subsuming it to what is familiar to the subject –whether the receiver (the ethical witness) or the producer (the ethical testimony).

With regards to the second consideration, Oliver gives a relational dimension to the act of giving testimony/witnessing, which involves the possibility of requesting accountability from the other and oneself, which has an impact on the "response-ability", understood as the ability to respond and the obligation of the response. It is understood as "responsiveness", to the extent that Foucault's understanding of power affects the ability to resist power and subvert it by articulating the capacity of agency which, however, involves exposing and denouncing and destabilising the axes of restraint. Recognising the capacity of agency and response is, necessarily, based on the relational consideration of the subjectivities involved in the dependence of structural conditions and discursive legacies that precede and condition our existence (Butler, 2014: 11). At the same time, it is interpreted from the perspective of "responsibility" because we are not living outside power relations and an ethical commitment is expected from us in the way we articulate the deployment of our response to the precariousness of the *Other*. That commitment is linked, once again, to the articulation of responses that revert the structural conditions that create vulnerability. Because vulnerability, as well as interdependence, dependence and performativity, are part of the social nature, but vulnerability is not evenly distributed (Butler 2006; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). Butler differentiates between 'precariousness' and 'precarity'. Precariousness is ontological in all lives that are subject to sudden disappearance. Precarity is the political status induced on some populations that suffer from a lack of economic and social support networks, and are more exposed to damage, violence and death (Butler, 2014).



### 1.3. Celebrities as the antithesis of the subject-victim relationship: destabilising possibilities

We think of celebrities as a starting point for the exploration of destabilising discourses because, theoretically, they represent a position that is located at the polar opposite of the notion of precarity. In the analytical context of post-feminism inaugurated by McRobbie, it is understood that the emergence of a discourse on “feminine success” in the media industries and popular culture will mean that the battles have been won and that equality is formally recognised (McRobbie, 2009). This feminism, identified as neo-liberal for its ability to blur the social, economic and cultural dimensions of inequalities (Rottenberg, 2014), advocates for an ethos of individual action, personal responsibility, and uncompromised free choice as the best strategy to produce gender equality (Keller and Ringrose, 2015). The ideological dimension of post-feminism has been widely exposed by Gill (2007) and it is particularly appropriate: post-feminism is not an epistemic turn, but neither a mere patriarchal reaction with pre-set meanings. For Gill, it constitutes a new sensibility that we must address to understand the distinctive aspects of the current articulations of gender in media (Gill, 2007). Only from this perspective we can (and must) emphasise the contradictory nature of the post-feminist discourses that combine feminist aspects with clearly anti-feminist elements –from the cult to the body as a tool of power to discipline and self-monitoring.

The ambivalence of the phenomenon has led to the emergence of a new field of research within cultural studies: celebrity studies (Holmes and Redmond, 2010), which capitalise on the studies on stars, fame and bio-policy, which was initiated in the late 1970s by Dyer (1979). Since then, and especially in recent years, numerous studies have focused on celebrities’ relevance to establish consumption trends in global capitalism, but mostly on their capacity to set body, beauty and sexuality models that become rooted in the modes in which we incorporate and inhabit in gender (Howe, 2008; Kokoli and Winter, 2015). In this context, the so-called celebrity feminism, notably linked to the discourses of empowerment and girl power, is based on the interpretative tangle of post-feminism: the ‘selling out’ of feminist principles and their co-option as a marketing device. The contradictions between the culture of free choice and the growing social inequality and between empowerment based on lifestyles and the growing difficulties to reach emancipation through the collective fight, are in this sense an suitable field to apply the analytical model of ethical witnessing with the objective of evaluating the transformative possibilities of this phenomenon which, at least, has enabled the revitalisation of the term feminism in the media discourse.

When we talk about the recognition of the “other” we refer to the recognition of the person who has suffered from violence/trauma, because we cannot understand her “pain” in its fullest traumatic dimension. Celebrities become here the Other as they have suffered from violence and carry a trauma. They act as a current synecdoche for all women who suffer from violence. We understand that their privileged position can facilitate recognition given that it allows them to connect the traumatic experiences with their systemic dimension, away from the narratives that identify them with individual heterogeneous characteristics. This prevents the identification of victims as poor, ignorant or economically-dependent and highlight the precarious nature of human existence, which is subject to structures that order things unequally. On the other hand, from their privileged position, celebrities have the ability to multiply the discourses and, in fact, have led awareness campaigns about very different social issues linked to social organisations. An example of this is the UN Women’s Goodwill Ambassadors programme, which focuses on the promotion of values by celebrities (<http://www.un.org/es/sg/mop/gwa.shtml>).

However, the post-feminist sensibility will affect the free use and free management of the body, which brings us back to the symbolic imaginary of a sovereign body, that is dependant on consumption, the control of the body and the individual handling of the constant self-creation as if there were not structural, cultural and economic limitations. The election, void of any political action, departs from the trivial consideration of empowerment according to which, as the trap of positive thinking, “where there is a will, there is a way”, outside any constriction or restraint.

On the other hand, granting celebrities the capacity of destabilising the frames of recognition of gender-based violence involves *chiaroscuro*: given their position of privilege, as people with social and economic success they find it less difficult to turn this issue into a subject. In this sense, the transformative policies that incorporate political claims, immediately, would force them to lose privileges. Very appropriate here is Fraser’s consideration on the dismantling of the project of political and economic transformation and social justice of the first wave of radical feminism, which was close to the new leftist movements. For the author, the transit from this stage to the predominance of cultural feminism meant the subordination of redistributive policies to identity policies (Fraser, 2005: 299) at the time of the emergence of neoliberalism. Thus, we consider the possibilities of addressing the forms of violence based on the gender regime under the sensibility of post-feminism.

## 2. Methodological proposal

Assessing the capacity of a media product to destabilise the modes of recognition of gender-based violence is not an easy task. This research study applies an analytical model based on the theoretical construct known as “ethical witnessing” to determine whether discourses can go beyond a spectatorial role towards gender violence and the victimisation of women and whether they may constitute examples that, beyond victimising, have an impact on the capacity of agency based on responsibility.

On the one hand, the participation of the person who has experienced violence in the narration and exposition of this experience is essential. Taking the statement of victims activates certain degree of agency that has been denied to them in the hegemonic model of recognition of gender-based violence, in which other people and institutions account for a reality that concerns others. Likewise, providing ethical witnessing implies, on the one hand, preventing the hetero-designation of women as victims and, on the another, encouraging the recognition of the witness through something more than the empathic reaction to the trauma (Kaplan, 2005). To assess the possibilities of the concept of ethical witnessing to give a new meaning to the subject-victim of gender-based violence, we take into account the following analytical dimensions: the type of relationship that develops between the testimony and the witness; the degree of transgression of the reified models of identification of the subject-victim; the focus on the capacity of agency; and the connections that are established with the fights for women’s rights and other fights for recognition, redistribution and participation.

## 2.1. Dimensions of analysis

In order to operationalise the concept we have established the following dimensions of analysis:

- a) The relationship between giving testimony and being the witness. According to Laub (cited in Kaplan, 2005) we must distinguish three levels of ethical witnessing. The first is articulated by voice, in first person, to give an account of the experience with violence. The second level is reached when, as a witness, the person gives an account of the testimony of other people. The third level involves the joint search for an elusive truth between the person that gives testimony (witness) and the person who witness the event itself (bearing witness). In popular culture, therefore, we analyse the condition of ethical witnessing through the relationship that is maintained in the process of production of cultural products with people who will give testimony of their experiences. Thus, the relationship is categorised over the axis that runs from the existence of some empathy and identification with the subject that testifies (first level) to the more active position of the person who listens –or provokes the discourse– in the exercise of an ethical responsibility when it comes to allowing a painful or embarrassing discourse to emerge (second level), to the joint search for a hidden reality in which, based on a specific case, the extent of a social problem (third level) is revealed.
- b) The content of the testimony: what the facilitation process produces. The type of discourse that is generated in the cultural product can either recreate the most obvious aspects of violence and, therefore, place itself in the hegemonic spectatorial space of violence or, however, can generate aspects that we do not know, that do not fit with the widely known and recognised reality of gender-based violence (the black eye, the corpse, etc.). Closely related to the process of production and selection of information (Plummer, 1995; Moorti, 2002), the narrative product expresses contents that may have an impact on re-victimisation through the accommodation of reality to the hegemonic mode of recognition or on the “complexisation” and, therefore, destabilisation of the framework through the inclusion of elements that reveal the axes of oppression in which violence is generated. Naming the oppression that enables or articulates violence pre-figures social demands.
- c) The vulnerability and resistance. The capacity of agency, understood as the capacity to articulate subjectivity without ceasing to reveal the structural constrictions that place subjects in conditions of vulnerability, can only be articulated by recognising the constraints of the subject and, therefore, abandoning the position of sobering-subject. The objective is to transition from the story of “injurability” and the rescue and restitution of the subject through the system to the exploration of the autonomous practices of resistance; and from solitary resistance to collective resistance and, therefore, to the social and political fight. This agency-building process allows us to go from the identification of the casuistry of the victim to the correlation of the injustices to which victims are collectively subjected and, therefore, enables the articulation of collective responses and from the restitution of the subject category through interdependence with others.
- d) The links between specific claims or denounces and the general frame of fight for women’s rights. In this regard, the reference to the feminist fight and other fights is a step towards the ethical positioning. For their analysis, we also use the terms of recognition, redistribution and



participation (Fraser, 2005). We evaluate the destabilising capacity of the frame of recognition from the integration of the fights against the unequal distribution of wealth (redistributive policies); the fights for the recognition of differences (recognition policies), and from the demand for equal access to the political power that goes beyond the established policy frameworks (participation policies). For the political dimension, we include the intersectional perspective as a guarantee of political positioning and of recognition of the processes of secondary victimisation that are prompted in the frameworks of institutional action and, therefore, allow their reprocessing as transformative proposals (Platero, 2012; Cubells *et al.*, 2010).

## 2.2. Case studies

The three selected media phenomena offer diversity in terms of formats and topics:

1. Beyoncé's feminist activism. Beyoncé has been built as a brand in the past two decades, facing the contradictions of post-feminism. In December 2013, Beyoncé launched in iTunes a song that featured fragments of a speech by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which publicly catapulted her as feminist. In 2014, Beyoncé ratified herself as feminist when she sang this song at the MTV's Video Music Awards, where she appeared in the dark in front of an illuminated "FEMINIST" sign. In 2016, her visual album "Lemonade" offered a visual spectacle that sought to capitalise on black feminism. In the presentation of the video she used the words of Malcolm X: "The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The most un-protected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the black woman". In the 2016 Super Bowl's halftime show Beyoncé paid homage to the Black Panthers and to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The model proposed by the iconic celebrity has received both criticism and praise for its use of feminist symbols and the possible co-option of a symbolic space for the promotion of her brand as artist.
2. Emma Watson's speech as a UN Women's Goodwill Ambassador. The actress delivered her speech in September 2014 in an event designed to become a global media phenomenon. Her #HeForShe campaign sought the alliance of men in the fight for gender equality and addressed some debates worth analysing from the perspective of ethical witnessing, mainly because of her partial position as testimony.
3. The interview to actress Carmen Maura in *Al Rincón* ("To the corner"), a Spanish TV show. In October 2015, at the age of 70, actress Carmen Maura shared in this prime-time television show her experience with rape 30 years ago. The narration places the reality of gender-based violence beyond the experience of rape and links the traumatic experience with the response of the institutions and their secondary victimisation.

The three selected cases articulate in different ways the dimensions of denunciation that can be elucidated with the concept of ethical witnessing. Thus, we will see how and to what extent our case studies occupy destabilising positions with regards to the hegemonic frameworks of recognition built around gender-based violence.

### 3. Results

Three adult, famous and independent women play different roles in the articulation of discourses on gender-based violence and the fight for women's rights. The following section analyses the main features of the three cases, according to the possibilities offered by the analysis of ethical testimony.

#### 3.1. The fictional testimony of Beyoncé: resist pain

Beyoncé condenses the post-feminist sensibility that puts her in a position of a capable sovereign-subject, located at the centre of the story and living in complete freedom. Hooks's critique (2016) makes reference to the following fragment of the lyrics of the song "Freedom": "I had my ups and downs, but I always find the inner-strength to pull myself up". This ability to overcome obstacles would come from women's inner strength and refers to the concept of empowerment in which there are no structural, cultural, or much less economic constraints: the inner strength guides the movement beyond the pain marked by gender and race.

With regards to the testimony-witness relationship, Beyoncé is a bearing witness to the pain of the gendered and racialised bodies. She takes the floor to testify without the need for a witness who facilitates the action. This lack of witness turns her into a fictional testimony: "Although based on the real-life experience of Beyoncé, 'Lemonade' is a fantasy fictional narrative with Beyoncé starring as the lead character. This work begins with a story of pain and betrayal highlighting the trauma it produces. The story is as old as the ballad of "Frankie and Johnny" ("he was my man alright, but he done me wrong"). Like the fictional Frankie, Beyoncé's character responds to her man's betrayal with rage. She wreaks violence, and even though the father in the song "Daddy's Lessons" gives her a rifle warning her about men, she does not shot her man" (hooks, 2016). For Hooks, therefore, the figure of Beyoncé fails to articulate herself as the subject who produces ethical witnessing, but instead gives voice and exposes the pain of black women. In addition, she fails to put on the table the relations of exploitation and domination. In this field, Hooks's work stands out precisely because it highlights the connections between violence against women and the power relations. Hooks argues that "it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women, as adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated" (2000: 118). From the intersectional perspective of Hooks, only if black women and all women resist the patriarchal romanticisation of domination, they will be able to resist becoming a subject-victim. Otherwise, the glamorisation of agency-building will not allow the destabilisation of the frames of recognition.

In fact, given her position as a voice that offers a fictional testimony, Beyoncé does not facilitate the emergence of other voices, other testimonies, and instead occupies their voices, just like she uses the symbolism of the diversity of bodies of black women, of the strong and powerful bodies through which the delivery of her message is articulated. In this sense, the first level of ethical witnessing proposed by Laub (cited in Kaplan, 2005) is not articulated given that what we observe is the re-appropriation and recreation of testimony. Likewise, Beyoncé does not create new feminist symbols but appropriates the existing ones, like the image of Rosie the riveter, which she reproduced in 2014 for its Instagram account.

With regards to the new knowledge on the reality of gender-based violence generated by the testimony, in the case of Beyoncé there is an exploration of resistances: resistance through the desiring body-agent, of a joyful and beautiful body. However, she does not channel new knowledge. In fact, the approach to gender-based violence is made from mere enunciation, which is only pointed out to claim its end without addressing its causes.

With regards to the resistances, the iconography presented by the artist has an impact on the dimension of resistance. Beyoncé embodies the notion of agency and, according to Weidhase, “her combination of explicitly feminist content with performances of sexual agency signifies an exploration of black female sexuality beyond respectability politics” (Weidhase, 2005: 130). The author examines in depth the positions that criticise the hyper-sexualisation of Beyoncé on the basis of the historical and recurrent dehumanisation and victimisation of black women based on their hyper-sexuality (Collins, 1993; Meyers, 2004). Therefore, reclaiming sexual agency involves an act of resistance to the marginalisation and blame experienced by women of colour.

On 8 July 2016, Beyoncé published a photo on Instagram with the following message: “We all have the power to channel our anger and frustration into action” on the occasion of the murder of two young African-Americans at the hands of the police. The reference to anger and its channelling as a resistance persists as the symbolic axis of the work of Beyoncé in recent times. Thus, in her song “Hold Up”, Beyoncé uses violence to take revenge and wonders: “what’s worse, looking jealous or crazy?” The use of violence as a strategy to escape pain is, undoubtedly, controversial since while it takes patriarchy away from the understanding of gender-based violence, for hooks violence involves betting on the re-articulation of the violent patriarchy for all men and all women (Hooks, 2016).

Finally, in terms of the connections established between gender-based violence and other types of violence and the axes of inequality, the figure of Beyoncé is connected to the feminist fight and the anti-racist fight: girl power and black power, although the assemblies in which violence is brewed are not revealed. Likewise, the collective dimension of the fight, linked to the demands for redistribution and participation, is absent from the discourse of the free choice and empowerment where the appearance of many bodies of women of colour do not necessarily refer to the notion of womanhood but rather refer to the aestheticisation of the body of dance for the show.

### **3.2. The collective responsibility of Emma Watson and everyday violence**

The speech delivered by 24-year-old actress Emma Watson at the United Nations is presented as a testimony motivated by responsibility. The actress speaks about herself, her fears and vulnerabilities, and about personal situations that are related to a series of violent acts in which her traumatic experience is among the mildest: “I’ve had my arse slapped as I’ve left a room. I’ve felt scared walking home. I’ve had people following me. I don’t talk about these experiences much, because coming from me they’ll sound like a huge deal and I don’t want this to be about me, but most women I know have experienced it and worse” (Watson, 2014). Her testimony tries to connect with the experiences of many women, without focusing on trauma. She combines the double dimension of giving testimony and being a witness of oppressive experiences, but highlighting her situation of privilege. As witness, just like Beyoncé, she occupies the voices instead of giving voice to the

diversity of experiences. However, she develops responsibility towards other people, precisely alluding to her position of privilege: “If not me, who? If not now, when?” (Watson, 2014).

On the new knowledge about the reality of gender-based violence that inspires the testimony, Watson’s speech is innovative in different areas: on the one hand, it highlights how the gender regime affects both men and women: “We don’t often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes [...] If men don’t have to be aggressive in order to be accepted, women won’t feel compelled to be submissive. If men don’t have to control, women won’t have to be controlled” (Watson, 2014). With this intervention, she highlights the changing and historically produced relational dimension of gender.

The references to cultural, structural and physical forms of violence (Galtung, 1990) give the speech the ability to go beyond the testimony genre. The recognition of the structural, cultural and also physical and direct forms of violence is facilitated by the references to multiple situations that serve different cultural frameworks -with the reference, for example, to forced marriages. Even so, the speech is built on issues that are framed within the perspective of equality feminism: the wage gap and equal opportunities that are encompassed in the concept of gender equality; equality feminism for which she will receive criticism for being deeply Western and being based on the idea of the sovereign subject. Thus, the text is articulated through the chain of meanings of “freedom” and “freer”, presenting social constraints as mere obstacles to be overcome through action.

As a result, rather than a promotion of the resistances, the speech of Watson, as liberal feminism, prefers the activation of action by the people who hold power. In this case, men are called to join the #HeForShe campaign because “I want men to take up this mantle so that their daughters, sisters, and mothers can be free from prejudice, but also that their sons have permission to be vulnerable and human too...” (Watson, 2014). This campaign involves the denial of the agency of women as subjects of violence, inequality and oppression to give men the ability to restore this lack of agency, to empower them and offer them freedom.

Human rights, women’s rights and the feminist fights are connected in the speech, but not so are the rights of distribution, participation and identity. Likewise, the speech does not address the contexts and situations where violence and inequalities are generated. From the liberal position that is promoted, the will to eradicate gender inequality depends on the will and, above all, the will of males. The involvement of men in the fight is done through the symbolic renunciation to feminism – given the recognition of the poor image of the term and the reluctance that it generates– and the establishment of a gender-neutral language.

### **3.3. Discursive transgression: Carmen Maura and the social meaning of rape**

Carmen Maura manages to transgress and destabilise the hegemonic framework of recognition of gender-based violence from the beginning of her story. The episode of abuse, which took place in 1975, is used to offer a criticism to the secondary victimisation inflicted by institutions. The actress explained that “the Prosecutor was more disgusting than the rapist” in a fragment of just 7 minutes, which later circulated across social networks. Sexual violence has not achieved the same levels of social and political recognition as violence against women in analogous affective relationships in the

Spanish State. Thus, her testimony aims to go beyond the recreation of the pain and trauma –which are very briefly referred in relation to rape- and locates the problem in the institutional dimension of the public and the State.

Rape is described as part of the violence inflicted against her and the violation and stealing of her privacy. This narration desexualises rape and places it at the same threshold of recognition as physical assault. This position disassociated rape from the narratives that victimise women through the recreation of a shameful attack on privacy and, above all, disassociates it from the crime to which it was associated at that time: offences against honour.

The format itself, the interview, could facilitate the promotion of ethical witnessing. The interviewer, the witness, however, is located in the first level: he gives voice but does not participate in the production of a painful discourse. In fact, at one point, his discourse makes Carmen Maura to justify her actions:

Testimony (Carmen Maura): “When I talked to the guy, which made me feel pity for him because he was insane, I told him that I would never call the police because I had had problems with the police when I was in the university, this was a lie, and told him a made-up story to calm him down...”

Witness (Interviewer): “Did you give him your phone number?”

Testimony (Carmen Maura): “Me? No. He must have found it. What he did take were underwear, papers, the keys to my house... so I guess he had it or looked for it, I don’t know. No, I did not give my number to him. Ah! He took my ID card, and my papers...” (*Al rincón*, 13 October 2015)

In this case, the witness judges the veracity of the testimony and abandons the ethical dimension of the witness, who should not try to understand and analyse the testimony, and instead should join the fight for the search of an elusive reality: in this case, the processes of secondary victimisation that result from the institutional activity that generates inclusions, but above all exclusions and denials.

The testimony, however, places itself in the ethical dimension since it aims to reveal the pillars that sustain this violence: the protection of the institutions that distrust the stories of the women, legitimated by a phallogocentric culture.

“... Considering that I had already told everything, considering that it had happened to me an hour ago, I had not had breakfast, I was destroyed, I had a punch here, my feet were terrible... you know what I mean?... then they pick up the phone and say: ‘Ok guys, go there because it seems to be true’... Later two policemen come up in civilian clothes and the questions start again. And, in addition, as they found out that I am an actress, they asked questions like, are you sure you didn’t want to put yourself in the spotlight? And this and that... That’s how it went!” (*Al rincón*, 13 October 2015)

Thus, the discourse generated by the testimony produces knowledge on the frames that maintain and legitimise sexual violence and attacks its discursive foundations: the mistrust of institutions, the violence inherent to the processes mediated by bodies and security forces of the State which respond to hierarchical structures and adherence to social norms –Hooks examines adherence to social norms as one of the elements that support gender-based violence (Hooks, 2000). Carmen Maura recounts



the effects of the judicialisation of violence when the processes are carried out without taking into account the people who suffer from them.

The questioning of the veracity of the testimony places these legal and police practices in the antipodes of the ethical witness. The testimony, on the other hand, asserts that ability to point out the spaces in which gender-based violence takes place and challenges the testimonials told in a systematic way.

In relation to the practices of resistance, the testimony fails to point out that capacity of agency given the secondary victimisation throughout the story: even in the medical examination she was told that “in order to overcome it [the trauma] she had to experience a similar thing”. There is only a glimpse of agency in the determination to overcome the hostility of the environment: “but for that I am very practical, it went away by itself. I said, no way! Carmencita, this won’t happen to you again... because I say so”. The way to resist is, simply, do not let the powers humiliate her.

On the connection of sexual violence with other fundamental forms of gender-based violence, the testimony focuses on that experience and there are no intersectional references.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

The activity of public figures involves clear potentiality to transgress the boundaries of the current mode of recognition and representation of gender-based violence. The concept of celebrity in itself transgresses the interpretation of the subject-victim of gender-based violence as vulnerable, dependent, and ontologically susceptible to be wounded. The public female personality is, thus, placed away from the hegemonic modes of recognition when she displays the post-feminist sensibility. However, when the testimony gets close to the personal experience, the fact of being a well-known public personality does not locate it, directly, away from the field of victimisation. Thus, the articulation of ethical witnessing from the processes of production is essential when the objective is to alter the hegemonic frames. This is what does not happen in the interview with Carmen Maura: the witness (interviewer) does not articulate this ethical dimension, but carries out interventions which even put into question Maura’s testimony. The relationship that is articulated between witness and testimony is not based on a subject-subject relationship, which is the epistemic principle that makes it possible to advance in the discovery of the contours of gender-based violence.

In the other two cases, the witness is not the foundation of the discursive production, and instead the subject that offers the testimony has sufficient capacity to articulate a discourse without facilitating witnesses. These aspects that are the furthest away from the representational canon of the subject-victim in which the destabilising potential is located in another locus are: the exploration of the resistances, the trust in the agency and the re-reading of sexuality as capital (Hakim, 2012). Beyoncé condenses this position of which Emma Watson is, however, further away.

The destabilising possibilities articulated by Beyoncé, as a media product, focus on three dimensions: the popularisation of feminism as a desirable value and related to trajectories of success; the powerful representation of agency; and the intersectionality that she embodies in terms of gender and race. However, in her fieldwork with teenagers, Keller and Ringrose (2015) understood perfectly the “celebrity economy” and criticised the co-option of feminism in celebrity brands. The comments

of the teen girls suggested that feminism should not be treated as a “fashion”, but instead as requiring long-term commitment (Keller and Ringrose, 2015) and highlighted the shallowness of the proposals. In the same work, Emma Watson’s #HeForShe campaign was criticised and accused of promoting a neo-liberal feminism that was safe for men, when the loss of privileges by men is a prerequisite for women to move forward on their positions.

The testimonial model of Emma Watson, enunciated from the perspective of equality feminism, offers the destabilising possibility of compromise. Although the campaign has a predominantly symbolic dimension, its main request is commitment and, therefore, responsibility from men and women. This ethical dimension involved in compromising reaches participatory policies and, in some ways, also the redistribution policies.

Thus, among the final conclusions it is important to include the possibilities offered by the analytical concept of ethical witnessing to study the possible re-signification of the subject victim of gender-based violence in the context of the action carried out by public and famous female figures of the popular culture.

However, although celebrities can subvert and escape from the strict narratives about violence, they do not facilitate the articulation of ethical witnessing in all of its dimensions. In fact, as we have seen, the fictional testimony characteristic of Beyoncé’s celebrity feminism does not manage to articulate the epistemic dimension of ethical witnessing since it occupies or represents the testimonies of other women who are not given a platform to speak up. In the case of Watson, her testimony involves the responsibility to speak up on behalf of others, but also for others. However, her testimony also occupies other voices and does not advance on the generation of new knowledge on the contexts of action of violence and inequality.

On the other hand, one of the strong points of celebrity feminism to destabilise the frameworks of recognition is the deployment of narratives about agency. However, these visual narratives not always manage to become rooted in the different collective fights. In the three cases under study, the collective dimension of the fight is not present other than as the sum of individualities. In the case of Beyoncé, when she appeals to rage and to the transformation of anger into action, she does not leave room to see what this action is and involves. In the case of Watson, she appeals to the individual commitment that could lead to a change of attitude in men, but does not associate it with other gender-based demands nor connects it with collective processes of social transformation. Maura’s testimony offer politically-located criticisms, but does not specify the ways to subvert secondary victimisation.

We understand, therefore, that the destabilising possibilities offered by celebrity feminism fail, primarily, due to their class affiliation that hides the contexts of violence and makes it difficult to see the connection with other forms of social violence. Therefore, although the performance of celebrities initially allows for the destabilisation of the narrative established on violence, it fails to become a re-signification of the framework as it can be co-opted by the “celebrity economy”, can be absorbed by (neo)liberal feminism and can become disconnected from the collective fight, hindering the apprehension of the shared character of the vulnerability to the intersection of the various forms of violence.

## 5. Notes

01. The analytical model is applied to television series, films and advertising campaigns of social organisations and advertising that can incorporate elements for the transformation of the established frameworks of recognition. This work is framed within the research project titled “The re-signification of the woman-victim relationship in popular culture: implications for representational innovation in the construction of vulnerability and resistance FEM2015-65834-C2-2-P (MINECO/FEDER)”.

02. This model would have had a crucial value in giving gender-based violence a central role in the public and political spheres. The infamous case of Ana Orantes is part of this first sphere in which the witness shows no responsibility towards the *Other*: there is not political stance nor a joint search for the truth, but the mere exposition of the trauma for its consumption.

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