

One Billion Rising: Important global ‘escalation’ to stop violence against women

Liliana Corrieri

February 14 is known worldwide as the Feast of Saint Valentine, Christian saint protector of lovers. However, February 14, 2013 will be remembered for another reason: a single-day global rising on violence against women, one of the biggest and fiercest volunteer action the world has even witnessed.

The choice of February 14 was not accidental. Fifteen years ago to this day, the first V-day took place with the simultaneous staging of ‘The Vagina Monologues’ by Eve Ensler in hundreds of theatres all around the world, where thanks to these powerful performances a large audience has been reached and every year money has been raised and donated to local organizations supporting victims of violence. The V of V-day stands for victory, valentine and vagina. This global activist movement has constantly grown over the years, and has strongly advocated the end of the perpetuation of gender based violence such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse, battery and domestic violence, sex trafficking and slavery, female genital mutilation (FGM). The “**One Billion Rising**” campaign was launched last autumn, and was called such since statistically one in three women globally experiences some sort of violence at some point of her lifetime. One in three means over one billion women whose lives will be inevitably marked by violence. This new campaign was launched with the intent to further raise awareness about the unacceptable violence and lead women (and men) from all over to rise and dance as a way to remind society of their profound disapproval and condemnation of any form of violence against girls and women. “*One billion women violated is an atrocity. One billion women dancing is a revolution.*” The song “*Break the chain*” with its choreography, has become the soundtrack and flash mob symbol of this global initiative, and on Valentine’s day it was sung, played and performed across the globe. Eve Esler explains the choice of rising through dancing:

Dancing insists we take up space. It has no set direction but we go there together. It’s dangerous, joyous, sexual, holy, disruptive. It breaks the rules. It can happen anywhere at anytime with anyone and everyone. It’s free. No corporation can control it. It joins us and pushes us to go further. It’s contagious and it spreads quickly. It’s of the body. It’s transcendent.

The response to this initiative has been impressive, outstanding, remarkable. Ministers, first ladies, actresses and sport champions, musicians and other celebrities, artists, doctors and nurses, migrant workers, NGOs, activists, students organizations, trade unions, national councils and whole international bodies such as the European Parliament and the UN: they all supported this campaign, recorded video-messages, shared their experiences, posted interviews and documentaries on their Facebook pages, and at last rose. Rising events were organized all over: from New Zealand to Columbia, from the Congo to the Philippines. From India to Italy, Mexico,

Argentina, Egypt to Indonesia. More than 150 countries took part in this initiative. The media coverage was also extensive, with well known news channels such as BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera dedicating large space to this global event with videos and articles on their web sites.

Violence against girls and women is a human plague, and therefore it is borderless. It reaches out across tribes, classes, countries. It is a global epidemic and not a personal or national matter. Some forms of violence such as acid attacks and female genital mutilation actually tend to occur in specific areas and are often related to unfortunately rooted harmful customs and conservative mentalities. However, other forms of violence against women take place anywhere, regardless of the continent, the flag fluttering in the wind, the skin color of the population, the religious faith professed. It is not just a problem of the remote areas and the underdeveloped regions. It is not necessarily a matter of a low social status or religious fundamentalism. It involves everybody. Rape, harassment and assault, abuses in the workplace, passion and honor killings, domestic violence, physical and verbal offence continue to be widespread even in the so called 'west' and 'north' of the planet. Here, emancipation is often confused with safety.

There is no doubt that the social status of women in the European and North-American continents enjoys a much higher recognition in comparison with areas such as Africa or the Middle East, especially in terms of civil and political rights, but also in terms of personal freedom (what to wear, read, listen to, where to go, who to marry and so forth). Nevertheless, despite the progress of the 20th century, a sense of "leadership" over women continues to endure in the minds of many men. Girlfriends and wives especially, and daughters too, have to know their limits, and they'd better not dare to overly disagree or respond. The high incidence of domestic violence in a country like the United States provides a clear example of the way religion and tradition are not always the main framework within which oppression and abuse against women occur. Moreover, many such boyfriends/husbands are not necessarily drugs dealers or people who spent time in jail, but ordinary citizens working in schools, offices, shops, supermarkets, banks even. Battering occurs among people of all races, ages, socio-economic classes, occupations and educational backgrounds.

A direct consequence of this alleged "subordination" is that sense of possession that unfortunately permeates the way many men live their private relationships with women. For some women divorcing an oppressing husband or breaking up with a boyfriend who proves not to be a suitable partner, is not an option. It is not a matter of legal impediments or moral issues, but simply a matter of mad jealousy. The "west" deals every year with an increasing number of the so called "passion killings" or "femicides". A small example: in Italy only, about 120 women were killed last year by either their (ex) husband or boyfriend, because they decided their relationship was over, because they fell in love with another man, or simply because they were tired of being oppressed and wanted to go their own way. This number means one woman killed

every three days. It is the worst record in Europe, a very dramatic number for a supposedly free and safe country.

Last but not least, regardless of the country they live in or the way they look, many women have to deal with the “blame” of having been raped. This is a kind of disputable heritage of those old medieval days when every war, every plague, every catastrophe, every famine, every sin, every fit of madness was due to women or a consequence of female “provocation”. The mentality of blame, very much embedded in society and institutions all over Latin America, Africa and Asia, continues to silently linger in the West as well. When a woman is raped in Europe or North America, she is likely to be blamed because her skirt was too short or even worse, because she was wearing a skirt, as if wearing a skirt is an official invitation for assault. True, some women could be quite provocative in the way they dress, but it is a matter of personal choice (and taste) and not a matter of explicit proposition, because some women might enjoy being looked at, but no woman enjoys the thought of violence being used against her. Notwithstanding, the reality is that many of the women raped in New York rather than in Moscow, were probably wearing jeans, a plain blouse and sneakers when they were harassed. The right approach therefore, is not asking the victim “what were you doing/wearing/saying before you were raped?”, but rather questioning the perpetrators as to what made them believe that harassing and abusing a woman was allowed, legitimate, justifiable and fair on her. It cannot be the woman’s fault because she was walking along that street, or because there was no bus service and in order to reach the market, she had to walk through the fields from her village. Blame must cover the perpetrators. Instincts, desires and frustrations have to be obviously dealt with in different ways and society has to become properly gender sensitized, for a world which can finally be fair to women, without threat or terror, fear, intimidation, harassment or judgment.

Women are equally valuable, intelligent and respectable humans. Women are no man’s possession and deserve the due freedom and respect, as citizens and as individuals. Enough is enough.

I am over how long it seems to take anyone to ever respond to rape...

I am over the thousands of women in Bosnia, Burma, Pakistan, South Africa, Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Haiti, Afghanistan, Libya, you name a place, still waiting for justice.

I am over rape happening in broad daylight.

I am over a woman being gang raped and murdered on a bus in Delhi or gang raped and violated in Steubenville Ohio...

I am over women still being silent about rape, because they are made to believe it's their fault or they did something to make it happen...

I am over the passivity of good men. Where the hell are you? ...

We need to END RAPE in every school, park, radio, TV station, household, office, factory, refugee camp, military base, back room, night club, alleyway, courtroom, UN office. We need people to truly try and imagine -- once and for all -- what it feels like to have your body invaded, your mind splintered, your soul shattered. We need to let our rage and our compassion connect us so we can change the paradigm of global rape...

(Extracts of Eve Ensler's poem 'Over it')