

Book review

Marie Buscatto, Sari Karttunen and Mathilde Provansal, Eds. *Gender-Based Violence in Arts and Culture: Perspectives on Education and Work*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, 231 pp., £24.36 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-80511-448-2.

Reviewed by: Paula Guerra , *Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Institute of Sociology, Griffith Center for Social and Cultural Research, University of Porto, Portugal*
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Marie Buscatto, Sari Karttunen, and Mathilde Provansal open this book with a necessary and urgent analysis of the presence and persistence of gender-based violence in the artistic and cultural worlds. Of course, the authors start from the global impact of the #MeToo movement to expose that such practices are not exceptions or deviations in specific industries. On the contrary, they affect a great diversity of creative and educational spaces—such as theater, cinema, dance, visual arts, and art schools—in different countries and at various scales of production. Gender-based violence affects all types of workplaces and educational, artistic, and cultural institutions in many countries, which suggests that these are not isolated incidents, nor the actions of a few isolated men. Instead, it reveals the systemic character of gender-based violence (Buscatto *et al.*, 2025), mainly in the Global North: France, Finland, the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States.

Buscatto, Karttunen, and Provansal argue that #MeToo has exposed the inequalities and power dynamics that are deeply rooted in these sectors but has not yet generated major structural transformations. Concomitantly, by giving greater visibility to the experiences of victims, a conservative reaction movement has emerged in the same way; it has been dubbed “anti-woke,” which seeks to delegitimize or discredit feminist demands. This is all the more concerning as there is a significant gap in research on the presence and persistence of gender-based violence in the artistic and cultural worlds. Although studies on gender inequalities in the artistic environment have increased over the last two decades, it is noted that these investigations tend to privilege the analysis of career paths, the distribution of resources, and survival strategies of women in competitive environments, rarely specifically observing gender or sexual violence.

For this reason, these sociologists rescue historical definitions to support the theme. An example is the contribution of the British sociologist Jalna Hanmer, who conceives violence against women—and the fear of such violence—as a form of social control by men, used to maintain female subordination (2025: 4). This violence, and the threat of it, limits women’s access to certain occupations and spaces of creation, compromising their artistic freedom and autonomy. It is also in this context that the concept of the “continuum of sexual violence” is proposed by Liz Kelly, understood as the interconnection between “minor” and “severe” forms of violence experienced by women throughout their lives (2025: 5). This model allows us to recognize both explicit practices—such as harassment and abuse—and more subtle and everyday violence—such as invasive looks, comments, jokes, symbolic exclusions, and emotional blackmail. In addition to reviving these concepts, this work proposes a comprehensive definition for the term “gender-based violence” (2025:

6). This conceptual choice aims to highlight gender as a power structure, recognizing a diversity of victims affected because of their gender identity, sexual orientation, or gender performance. In this book, the notion of “gender-based violence” is advocated to emphasize that gender, as a social relation and system of power relations, is the organizing principle of violence, and to consider a diversity of targeted victims according to their sex, gender identity or performance, and their sexual orientation. Gender-based violence refers to all forms of violence, whether verbal, physical, sexual, psychological, economic, interpersonal, or institutional, committed in public and private spheres against people on the basis of their claimed or attributed gender identity, their sexual orientation, or their position in the hierarchy of masculinities (2025: 7).

The fact that the artistic medium is often perceived as a liberal and sexualized space, which makes it difficult to recognize violence, catapults this book to the level of urgency. The naturalization of abusive conduct is reinforced by informal structures, the absence of clear protection policies, and the symbolic weight attributed to the creative genius—generally a male figure who is allowed everything. Added to this are job insecurity, dependence on informal networks, and a constant fear of compromising future career opportunities.

This book is both necessary and urgent for the different people involved in art workshops in the cultural and creative sectors—including researchers. It is organized into three parts. Part I, “Gender-Based Violence, Power Relations and the Reproduction of Gender Inequalities,” explores the systemic drivers of gender-based violence and inequality, starting with Chapter 2, “French Opera: A Professional World Haunted by Gender-Based Violence” by Marie Buscatto, Soline Helbert, and Ionela Roharik, which investigates how gender-based violence manifests itself in the universe of professional opera in France. The study examines the case of soprano Chloé Briot, who in 2020 publicly denounced the sexual violence suffered by a fellow singer. The research that underpinned this chapter was conducted in 2020 and included semi-structured interviews with opera professionals in France, as well as an anonymous online survey that collected 336 responses, which represents about 10% of the professional population in the sector. The rigid and hierarchical structure of the sector, associated with informal practices and precariousness, favors the maintenance of sexist practices and sexual violence. Three-quarters of the people surveyed reported having witnessed sexist behavior or acts of a sexual nature, and 84.5% of the victims are women. More than two-thirds of the perpetrators reported were men, many of whom occupied positions of direct power over the victims, such as conductors, directors, choir or institution directors, and singing teachers. The authors assert that the world of opera creates favorable conditions for gender violence, especially against female singers. Power structures, institutional silence, hypersexualization, and competitiveness form a system that perpetuates harassment and prevents reporting. At the same time, violence compromises the mental health, confidence, and professional trajectories of victims, leading many to leave the sector or to self-exclude themselves out of fear, shame, or fatigue.

Chapter 3, “Navigating the Boundary Between Subjection and Agency: Gender-Based Violence in the Japanese Popular Music Industry” by Chiharu Chujo, critically analyzes how gender-based violence manifests itself in subtle, persistent, and structural ways in the Japanese popular music industry. Chujo points out that it was only 6 years after the #MeToo movement that denunciations and public discussions about these issues began to emerge more openly in Japan. The author contextualizes the functioning of the Japanese music industry as a dynamic, multifaceted, and highly segmented space, which encompasses genres such as J-pop, J-rock, J-hip-hop, enka, anime, and idol. Each of these styles has a specific fan community and aesthetic standard of its own. Despite the apparent diversity, the sector is strongly marked by unequal power relations, being traditionally dominated by men in both creative and administrative positions. This inequality is highly visible in the rock and hip-hop genres, but manifests itself particularly acutely in the idol system, where young women are promoted with strict criteria of beauty, little artistic autonomy, and high objectification. In addition, the interviewees reported feeling exposed to a culture of “lookism,” where appearance is constantly observed and valued.

Chapter 4, “Gender-Based Violence in French Art Schools and the Reproduction of Gender Inequality in Contemporary Art” by Mathilde Provansal, analyzes the presence and persistence of gender-based violence in the context of artistic higher education in France. The starting point for the reflection is the public mobilization that began in September 2020 with the creation of anonymous accounts on social networks to denounce cases of sexual harassment and abuse in art schools, especially the Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts de Besançon. The action, inspired by the #BalanceTonPorc movement, resulted in the publication of testimonies accompanied by sensitive content warnings and legal definitions, encouraging other schools to replicate the initiative and open up space for sharing experiences of violence. Despite the growing attention to gender-based violence in elite universities and institutions, the author points out that art schools do not receive due attention in research. Beginning with the case of French schools of visual arts, the chapter investigates how gender-based violence in artistic training contributes to perpetuating gender segregation and thus to structural inequality in the sector. Provansal identifies mechanisms that sustain this sexual violence in art schools. The first is the sexualization of female students, even when they represent the majority of the student body: the physical appearance, “personality”—a term highlighted by the author—and attractiveness of female students are often discussed during selection processes, while professional criteria are devalued in the case of women. The second mechanism is the position of dependence of students in relation to teachers, who occupy the role of mentors, directly influencing students’ professional opportunities. The last mechanism is based on the lack of preparation of schools to receive complaints of this type. Despite some measures implemented from 2017 onwards, such as equality commissions, mandatory training, and listening channels such as Allosexism, the chapter shows that there is still great ignorance, fragility in implementation, and a lack of specific training to deal with cases of violence. Provansal concludes that gender-based violence in French art schools is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a structured system that combines hierarchy, silence, informality, and sexualization.

Part II, “Creating Representations of Gender-Based Violence in Art and Culture,” focuses on representations of violence in the artistic sector. Chapter 5, “The Helsinki School: Gendered Image Shaping and Gender-Based Violence in a Photography Branding Project” by Leena-Maija Rossi and Sari Karttunen, examines the case of the Helsinki School as a paradigmatic example of the coexistence of an apparent female visibility and the maintenance of a patriarchal power structure in higher art education. The school, celebrated as a successful international project and showcase for young women photographers, was at the center of a series of sexual harassment allegations revealed by the Finnish press in 2022. The interviews conducted with the students point to systematic practices of emotional manipulation, grooming behaviors, verbal and physical harassment, and sexual coercion. Another central aspect addressed is the culture of informality and familiarity present in the artistic environment, which blurs the boundaries between the personal and the professional. This ambiguity favors institutional silence and the naturalization of abusive behavior.

Chapter 6, “Creating Content About Gender-Based Violence and Sexuality While Being Subjected to Sexual Harassment: Experiences of UK Screen Industries Workers” by Anna Bull, investigates the intersections between the production of content about gender-based violence and sexuality and the work cultures marked by sexual harassment in the film and television industries in the United Kingdom. The aim is to understand how these working conditions affect the creative freedom of women, and gender and sexual minorities, and whether the creation of this type of content influences the professional culture and gender order in the sector. The author stresses that informality and the valorization of a “relaxed” environment in audiovisual industries can create a space conducive to the normalization of intimate and sexualized sharing, without adequate protection or mediation. This environment, while being presented as creative and open, can become a fertile ground for harassment to take hold and remain unpunished.

Part III, “Challenging Gender-Based Violence in Artistic Work,” investigates resistance efforts, featuring case studies at the intersection of empirical research, victim listening, and critical analysis. Chapter 7,

“Playing is Not Consenting: Sexual Harassment in New York Theatre” by Bleuwenn Lechaux, examines how the routine practices of New York theater create fertile ground for confusion between consent and abuse, and how these dynamics intertwine with deep-rooted gender inequalities. The methodology involved long interviews, conducted during two different periods. In 2015, topics such as the “scandal” at the Wooster Group were treated with caution and reticence, reflecting the sensitivity of the sector. In 2017, #MeToo made room for many participants to speak publicly for the first time, even though the topic remained delicate. In the first part of the chapter, Lechaux describes working conditions and gender inequalities in New York theater. The sector is segmented into Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-Off, distinctions that are related to the size, financing, and visibility of productions. Although the number of women in the field is growing, they are still often associated with roles, texts, and stagings that are considered “minor” compared with men’s work. The author also addresses the legal framework in the United States, where sexual harassment is classified by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *quid pro quo* or “hostile work environment.” The second part of the chapter focuses on harassment as a product of professional practices. In theater, emotional intensity, physical closeness, and the fusion of personal life and work—especially on tour—create a context in which physical intimacy is normalized and interpreted as an enhancer of artistic performance. Social events and networking are seen as professional requirements, and physical appearance—especially for women—is valued as a “competency” that can determine the assignment of roles. Harassment is thus part of a system of power that shapes careers: it can serve as a currency of integration into professional networks or as a threat of destruction of reputations. Subjectivity in hiring—a characteristic of the artistic sector—aggravates the arbitrariness and vulnerability of professionals. The lack of legal knowledge and the small size of the companies further limit the ability to report. In the third part, Lechaux explores combat strategies, including mutual support initiatives and industry-specific tools such as Intimacy Directors International, which establishes safe practices for intimate scenes based on five pillars: context, consent, communication, choreography, and closure. However, Lechaux stresses that making the problem visible does not necessarily guarantee its resolution. The mediatization of criminal cases has driven measures, but effective combat requires addressing the continuum of that gender inequalities sustain violence, intervening in professional practices that perpetuate subordination.

Chapter 8, “From Rumours to Calling Out: Denunciations of Gender-Based Violence in Electronic Dance Music in France” by Alice Laurent-Camena, begins from an apparent contradiction: in an artistic field where the fight against gender violence is assumed as a legitimate political cause, there is persistent silence about these experiences. Laurent-Camena shows that women and LGBTQ+ artists are highly likely to face different forms of violence throughout their careers, in contexts ranging from festive interactions to everyday work, including marriage with other members of the scene. The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out between 2020 and 2023 with eight musicians from the electronic scene in five French cities. Laurent-Camena identifies three phases or modalities in the itinerary of denunciations: the rumor, the internal denunciation, and the public denunciation. The first is marked by a “code of silence,” which corresponds with a state of diffuse knowledge, where “everyone knows, but no one says.” The second phase, the internal complaint phase, occurs when the rumor acquires legitimacy within a network of peers and moves from the victim to the accused to stigmatization. The third phase, the public denunciation, marks the entry of the public as a receiver and actor in the process, often through statements published on social networks by artistic collectives to which the accused belongs. The analysis shows that, although the fight against gender-based violence has gained the status of a recognized cause, the social validation of a complaint often depends on the profile of the person who issues it: established men or collectives with high symbolic capital. Laurent-Camena highlights three central points: the coexistence between persistent rumors and rare public denunciations is not contradictory; the effectiveness of a complaint depends on the legitimacy of the person who makes it, with gender and social status being decisive factors; and, despite the politicization of the issue, not all complaints are received as valid. Paradoxically, “exemplary” public

accusations can reinforce barriers to victims' discourse, perpetuating a cycle in which violence is recognized, but not always fought consistently.

ORCID iD

Paula Guerra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2377-8045>

Reference

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