

SOLIDARITY WITH PERSECUTED HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN

When, in November 2011, the acting Minister for Health and Social Solidarity Andreas Loverdos was making statements like “[...] a great problem of the city is the undeclared illegal prostitution and its relationship with the problem of the propagation of AIDS”, “the transmission from the illegal immigrant to the greek client, to the greek family” and “the women carriers should leave the country”¹ he already had the approval of the Greek society so that six months later, in May 2012, dozens of women were persecuted and remanded with felony charges for “intentionally causing grievous bodily harm against an unknown number of people”². Their arrest during “clean up” operations in the center of Athens and their diagnosis as HIV positive were reason enough, for their names and photos to be posted online, at first on the greek police site and then everywhere in the Media, and for them to be defined as prostitutes. They were then attributed the intention to infect [sic] their clients, which turned them into a new “health bomb”. We consider that this new witch-hunt aims first of all to discipline and repress the bodies of women.

The public health as a tool for controlling and oppressing is nothing new. Already, the previous months with the excuse of the preservation of the health of the greek citizens, we saw detention camps being build and dozens “sweep” operations targeting immigrants. In any case, bio-politics as a means of managing population has not been seldom used. It’s enough to remember the mass hysteria over “crazy cows” and the avian flu and also, more recently, the flu H1N1. A feeling of constant danger is therefore constructed and it has a double function; on the one hand it gives the green light to the “specialists” to do whatever is necessary for our protection, and on the other hand it unites us as a nation opposite a common threat. In this way an identity develops, the healthy, the greek straight family man who is endangered from the Other: the foreign, the infectious, the abnormal; in this case the HIV positive, the sex-workers, the drug addicts, the immigrant women.

As such, the racist tools and the methods of exclusion are enriched. Meanwhile, the inaccuracies and the misinformation from the minister of health, as well as from the media come and go. From false statistic data that showed an increase of 1000% in AIDS cases and the deliberate confusion of the terms AIDS and HIV, to the spectacular appearances on the court with the detained women wearing medical masks and the cops wearing gloves (while it is well known that the HIV virus is not transmitted neither by contact nor by air). All this have as a result the stigmatization of the HIV-positive as an identity, and its total exclusion. So in the face of public health, all the institutional agents are indifferent to the dignity of the women that are stigmatized. The statement by Michalis Chrisochoidis (The Minister of Citizen Protection), that characterizes as exaggerated the reactions “for the violation of the rights of these women, for they ignore that there is a conflict between two rights here; On the one hand, the right on the individuality of the prostitute [sic] and on the other the overmatch right on the protection of the public health” is in any case hypocritical, since we know very well that these women, like so many others that are marginalized, never had the supposed “democratic” rights.

The mass media did what they always do, violently capitalizing on the bodies of these women in every way, not the least of which was the use of alleged stories of 18-year old boys that escaped death or ‘true’ stories of the women themselves. Now everybody has the right to talk about and for them. The roots of the ease with which the personal information and the photos of the women were published in the website of the greek police and in many media outlets can be found in the recent past: When a matter of public safety

arose in relation to rapists and pedophiles, the public opinion was eager to consent to the publication of the suspects' photos, in order to be even more protected from them. Since then, this tactic was deployed in many occasions, with the latest examples being the demonstration of the 12th of February and the recent fights in football matches, making evident how a state of exception can be easily generalized.

Some people believe that the case of the seropositive women is just pre-election strategizing; even if this is partly the case, we believe that it's much more. Elections come and go, but the stigma and the destruction of the lives of these women - the destruction of the life of even one woman - those are permanent consequences. The choice and the targeting of these women is not at all random. They are those with the fewer alliances, and they occupy many different non-normative identities, so the public consent to their stigmatization will be the maximum possible.

Also, let us not forget for the sake of whose security all these are happening. Everything happens for the defense of the greek family, which reproduces the main structural components of the dominant order: on the one hand, the heterosexual monogamous sexuality, which is the cornerstone of patriarchy, and which aims only in the latter's uninterrupted reproduction; on the other hand, the perpetuation of the greek family, which is the core of the national backbone, and absolutely necessary for its existence. At the same time, it becomes clear once more that men, fathers, husbands and sons have needs that must be fulfilled. The clients, then, are the only ones who won't be stigmatized for sure. After all, it's indicative of the kind of society we live in, that nobody will ask whether there is the possibility that the seropositive clients were indeed the ones who transmitted the virus to the women.

Female exploitation through prostitution was always an open secret and now, with the ministers' statements, it is confirmed once more how widespread and accepted the role of the client is by the state. Prostitution is an exchange between the customer who demands, and the pimp who procures, and the girl is just a commodity. Everything aims towards the satisfaction of the customer, who is always looking for new services, underage girls and, of course, sex without protection (about which the sex-workers were, again, accused). Pimps, criminals and cops profit from the exploitation of women's bodies. Let us not forget that when we are talking about prostitution in greece, we are talking mainly about victims of trafficking.

As for the HCDCP (Hellenic Center for Disease Control & Prevention), whose job is, supposedly, to protect and "*support special and vulnerable parts of the population*", we saw their real job is stigmatization and disciplining, as they helped the cops find, forcibly test and imprison the women. We can hardly call "humanitarian work" their forced health inspections. It is also of small importance to us that the HCDCP workers remembered to write a denunciatory notice after two weeks, 31 women in custody and wave after wave of public outrage. Especially when in this notice the only thing they're trying to do is to renounce their responsibilities and convince us for the usefulness of their job.

THE REAL THREAT ARE THE CLIENTS AND THEIR PROTECTORS,

NOT THE HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN /

SOLIDARITY TO THE PERSECUTED HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN /

SOLIDARITY TO SEX WORKERS

Despite their acquittal from the court, these women remained in custody for up to 8 months. They were charged with prostitution and with severe intended bodily harm, even though from the beginning all of them, except one, denied they were sex-workers. The only cause for the forced health inspection from the HCDCP and the cops was their appearance and the fact that they were women, alone in the street; the only reason they were arrested as sex workers is because they were tested positive to HIV. Seropositivity is identified with sex working, sex working is labeled as a threat which will contaminate the healthy greek society, the HIV virus is demonized and those who test positive are stigmatized. The provision by Loverdos, the minister of health, which allowed the arrest and the publication of the personal information of these women, was withdrawn for a while from the deputy minister of health at the time, but its reinstatement was one of the first actions of Adonis Georgiadis, when he was designated as minister of health, and it was supported by the HCDCP. This shows that the management of certain population groups in terms of public health (meaning public order), bio-politics itself, is here to stay.

As horrifying as these events seemed to us then, it was just a part of the general strategic plan developed by the greek state to manage the lives it deems as unworthy and redundant. We saw the anti-immigrant operation "Ksenios Zeus" in August 2012 (it continues until today), and the anti-drug-addict operation "Thetis" in March 2013. The result of these operations was, on the one hand, the arrests of immigrants, their placement in detention centers and their deportation, and on the other hand, the arrests of drug-addicts and their profiling. The horrible conditions in those detention centers became widely known after the last revolts of the immigrant prisoners, in august 2013. The role of bio-politics as a tool for population management is double: on the one hand, it instills fear in immigrants and drug-addicts, especially concerning their presence in public spaces. On the other hand, with the illegalization of immigrants, it exploits their constant search for the improvement of their life conditions, placing them in a vicious cycle of illegality, which has several stages: social racism in detention camps and/or police stations, murders and rapes in the borders, exclusion in the cities' public spaces. This is modern governance made in Greece.

Taking all of this into account, the fact that golden dawn got elected in the parliament didn't surprise us. Greek society always was (and still is) a deeply racist and sexist society, which excluded (the Other based on its difference and inferiority) every Other it encountered on the basis of the latter's difference and inferiority. It is worth noting that the aforementioned state strategies, such as the creation of immigrant detention centers and the "sweeping" operations in the center of Athens, were deployed a long time before the entrance of golden dawn in the parliament. Of course, the rise of golden dawn's popularity gave way for the heightening of racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes and actions, as well as for a generalized move towards the political right, inside and outside the parliament. We mean that golden dawn and its actions, even though not supported by everyone, was nevertheless legalized and entrenched in daily life. All this until 18/9/2013, when Pavlos Fisas was murdered by members of the golden dawn and the government accused it as a criminal organization. But this wasn't the first time the fascists murdered someone. They've been murdering, assaulting and battering immigrants, trans people, homosexuals, lesbians and women for a long time. In the murder of Fisas, though, the greek society saw itself in the face of the victim for the first time. It becomes evident once more, then, which lives the greek citizens deems unnecessary, and to which social groups they are willing to show solidarity. Two birds with one stone; the party of golden dawn personified neo-nazism in Greece, so, with the persecution of some of its members, the matter was considered closed. However, racism, homophobia and sexism are prevalent conditions in today's attitudes and in our relationships.

This text was written in May 2012 –when all the HIV-positive women were still on remand– and was reissued with some adjustments in October 2013 in the context of the screening of the documentary Ruins in Athens. The translation to English along with small changes were made in May 2014 for the event “Chronicle of a Witch Hunt: persecution and pillorying of HIV positive women in greece”, in Darmstadt, germany.

gender asphyxia ★

gender_asphyxia@yahoo.com

Notes

1. http://news247.gr/eidiseis/loverdos_na_apelathoun_oi_allodapes_foreis_toy_aids.1539175.html
2. From the press release of the Greek police on the 10th of May 2012 where the briefs are being mentioned: http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&lang=%27..%27&perform=view&id=14964&Itemid=902&lang
3. The sources are from various sites: “Like the minister said, in 2010 was recorded an increase of 580% of AIDS cases, while in 2011 the increase touches upon 1.000%. Causes for the multiplication of AIDS cases in Greece are the prostitution by illegal, unregistered immigrant women and the syringes of drug users” [tvxs, 24/9/11]. “Even the more collected, freeze in front of the shocking data for the rapid increase, of the AIDS cases in 2011, in Greece. In 2010 the percentage of the disease incidents reached 580%” [Star channel, 23/9/11] At the same time the KEELPNO data, reports 67 cases of AIDS in Greece in 2011, 81 in 2010 and 75 in 2009; therefore in 2011 there was a decrease (<http://www.keelpno.gr/el-gr/νοσήματαθέματαυγείας/λοιμώδηνοσήματα/hivaid्सάλλασεξουαλικώςμεταδιδόμενανοσήματα/hivaid्स.aspx#20>).
4. HIV is the virus that causes the AIDS disease. One can be seropositive, to carry the HIV virus, without never having the disease.
5. <http://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/yperamynontai-tis-dimosieysis-ton-fotografion-ton-ierodoylon>