

## Introduction

We can identify the first public debates of gendered violence in Mexico back in the early 90s decade with the infamous femicides of Ciudad Juárez (Monárrez Fragoso, 2009), a city next to the border with the United States where in a period of 12 years, nearly 400 women were “kidnapped, raped, strangled, mutilated, and buried in shallow graves in the desert or at construction sites and railroad yards around the city” (WOLA, 2005).

The public debate has continued growing since then and has been intensified with the #metoo movement since late 2017 until this day with a long list of cases of harassment, rape, intimidation, torture and killings (Artistegui Noticias, 2020). But a relatively new form of violence against women in Mexico, but now on the rise, are acid attacks (Peña Roja and Martinez, 2020).

### Media calls it “Acid attack on Oaxacan saxophonist”

A prominent case occurred on September 9, 2019 against María Elena Ríos Ortiz, a 26 years old woman who was allegedly attacked by her former partner, an ex-lawmaker. This took place at her hometown, in the small city of Huajuapán de León, in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico.



The above photo was just published on June 3, 2020 in María Elena Ríos' Instagram account (elenarios93, 2020) while the actual magazine was printed the next. Below I use the visual analytical tools of focalization and framing to provide a wider perspective of it.

## **Focalization**

Who is telling the story? Whose view is embedded in this picture?

This analytical tool attempts to understand the “connection between the subject of vision and that which is seen” (Meijer, 1993: 375).

First thing to notice on this picture is that it is not an *in-situ* photograph, but a carefully crafted scene in form of a magazine’s cover. Hence, it’s worth asking: who or what does the Mujeres (women) magazine represent? Mujeres is nothing more than a merchandising pamphlet which contains advertisements, mostly targeting women, of a variety of touristic related products and services of the state of Oaxaca. Its website identifies the magazine’s objective as “Promote, in a diverse and permanent way, citizen campaigns with the various social sectors, particularly with tourism service providers and the governmental authorities, in order to make the great leap towards the development and progress of the Oaxacan people” (Revista Mujeres, 2013).

This magazine is freely distributed in a variety of restaurants, hotels and touristic stands throughout the state of Oaxaca and it is entirely in Spanish, therefore it is dedicated for the national tourism that is already in the state of Oaxaca. In this case, María Elena as a symbol is also localized in Oaxaca: herself being widely identified as of Oaxacan origin and also wearing a traditional costume from *the Mixteca*, the Oaxacan region where she is from.

At the bottom of the picture the phrase “la vida después de mi agresión” (the life after my aggression) attempts to allude María Elena’s voice, as if this is her most important statement in her testimony, but this is the magazine’s editorial who picks and portrays this somewhat powerful statement. The voice, the one that exerts the power of the story-telling is not the protagonist’s, but the magazine’s with María Elena as an instrument of communication and used for merchandising purposes, rather than a social activism campaign.

María Elena was not a public figure before her attack. This happening has been widely used by the media and feminist collectives (Televisa News, 2019, El Universal, 2020) to visibilize the violence against women, resilience and counter adversity of women. This is not the case.

## **Framing**

What is emphasized and what omitted is in this picture?

“Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993).

María Elena is placed right at the center of the photo in a seated position, whereas a standing up position would have indicated a sign of pride and showing-up. She covers her body with a traditional dress that

attempts to extol her indigenous background, although it shows the skin burns in her arms as the only witness of the acid attack.

She holds a saxophone on her lap and with the right hand, both as a symbol of her profession and as a cover, that along with her hair, are placed over her face, only showing a shy look with her right eye.

At a first glance, the photograph's rhetoric is powerful and symbolic: a victim of an atrocious crime is back in the public life, moving on. But more interestingly: she is still hiding at the same time. She does not show her face, the area of her body most severely affected by the acid. The scars in her face are the most prominent symbol of the attack but it is intentionally concealed.

Connecting with the focalization analysis, this picture is a product that is made to sell. Thus the need to depict what is pretty and classy: her hair, the traditional dress and the saxophone; and hide the scars and the violence therein. The emphasis goes on those aspects that do not cause rejection from the audience, and make more salient those that are material of consumption.

The narrative of the picture is also of a woman who was attacked, survived, but does not "stand" and strike back. She being sited and hiding relates to a conforming position rather than a resilient and critical posture. The phrase "the life after my aggression" goes along the same tone: emphasizing the aggression but resigning herself to what is left in her life after the attack.

There are also interesting contradictions in the elements of the picture as these relate to a cosmopolitan way of life: the saxophone is presented in "solo", opposed to the vernacular setting of a popular orchestra in the Oaxacan context. Her hair is done with a western style in a opposition with the traditional braids with colored laces of the region. And while the handmade dress is representative of her hometown, it is immerse in an urban setting framed with a tiled gray wall that rejects a more representative landscape of Oaxaca.

The above constitutes a narrative of whitening and westernize her as a symbol, to make her more palatable and material for sell by dissolving her identity but keeping a few elements to disguise a selling strategy as a social activism campaign.

## **Conclusion**

When I found this picture shared in my social media contacts, for a moment I was positively surprised that María Elena's case was getting more visibility. But quickly I started to realize that there's more that the photo is silencing that it is actually saying. I chose the Focalizing tool as it provides a comprehensive context of who "speaks" through this picture, what its purpose is. I have seen this magazine around many times before and still remember the first time when I read the title: mujeres; a total disappointment of the content.

And I chose Framing tool once I saw the contradictions in the elements depicted. This helped me to identify those things that are shown and those that are explicitly erased and that altogether build a narrative. These two perspectives provide a two-handed grip on the situation and messages behind and in the forefront of the picture.

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