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Sex Strikes: Boycotting Sex as a Homicide Prevention Tactic

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Introduction

When a group of people withhold sexual activity to affect a common goal it is known as a sex strike or, more formally, lysistratic non-action. This strategy is recognized as a unique intervention tactic for homicide prevention.¹ Lysistratic non-action is listed as a method of social noncooperation on Gene Sharp's list of nonviolent actions. Sex strikes are a documented way of non-violently ostracizing persons who are perpetrating violence.²

Sex strikes have been used to affect numerous types of change (political negotiations³, construction of paved roads⁴, and an end to firework displays⁵), but the focus of this research brief is the use of sex strikes as anti-violence initiatives. A boycott of sexual activity to achieve an end to violence is nuanced in its effectiveness and its implications of gender relations and violence.

History

The technical term for sex strikes is derived from Aristophanes' Ancient Greek comedy, "Lysistrata." This play presents the earliest known instance of a sex strike. "Lysistrata" tells the story of a woman, Lysistrata, who persuades the women of Greece to withhold sex from their husbands and suitors to bring about an end to The Peloponnesian War. Comedy ensues, Lysistrata is successful, and the men negotiate a peaceful end to the war.⁶

Gender solidarity to achieve a common goal is central to the play. In a key scene, Greek women must put out a fire that the warring men have set, creating imagery paralleling the efforts of the women to "put out" the spreading, male-perpetrated violence.⁷ The account in "Lysistrata" is fictional, but the idea of withholding sex to achieve an end to violence has endured.

Cases of Sex Strikes as Anti-Violence Tactics

This section lists and describes sex strikes implemented in response to rising rates of violence.

The Women of Liberia for Mass Action for Peace

The Women of Liberia for Mass Action for Peace (WLMAP) originally developed as a multi-faith, prayer-based effort to end Liberia's second civil war in 2003.⁸ WLMAP began with peaceful protests of 2,500 women at the fish market in Monrovia, Liberia. Protest participants felt that since men were perpetrators of the violence during the war, withholding sex from their husbands and lovers would persuade them to eventually accept peace as a solution. Further, they coupled their sex strike with traditional public protests, radio

broadcasts for peace, and support of democratic elections. The civil war ended and the WLMAP assisted in facilitating democratic elections.⁹

La Huelga De Piernas Cruzadas (The Strike of Crossed Legs)

In 2005, Pereira, Colombia had 480 gang-related deaths.¹⁰ The wives and girlfriends of gang members instituted a sex strike, with support of the local government, to end gang violence and related homicides. When questioned about their involvement in gangs, Pereira gang members said that they were drawn to gangs for power, status and sexual attractiveness, but not for money.¹¹ Several of the girlfriends of the gang members remarked that the central message of the protest was to let gang members know that women do not find violence attractive. Notably, the strikers assured reporters that they did not expect their husbands' sexual frustration to lead to intimate partner violence.¹²

In 2010, Pereira saw a 26.5% decline in homicide rates, the steepest decline in Colombian history.¹³ In reports of The Strike of Crossed Legs, this statistic is commonly cited as proof of the effectiveness of the strike. Alternatively, it is important to note that from 2008 to 2010, the National Strategy Information Center partnered with the Pereira local government to institute the Culture of Lawfulness Project. This program used cross-sector initiatives to provide education to citizens to foster more public deference of Colombian laws.¹⁴ The relationship between sex strikes and other homicide prevention tactics is discussed in the analysis section.

Dado Village Sex Strike

In the Dado village on the Mandanao Island in the Philippines, women used a "sex strike" to end separatist violence, including homicide. Most families in Dado village are displaced from other violent conflict.¹⁵ The violence surrounding Dado village alienated the village from local trade routes and market centers.¹⁶ The idea for the sex strike began in a sewing cooperative sponsored by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Women were unhappy with their inability to freely move in and out of the locale due to violence on the roads. Within a week of the sex strike, husbands of the protesting women began peace negotiations with leaders from surrounding villages.¹⁷ These negotiations led to an end to intra-clan violence and homicides.

Guns Get None

In 2012, after a gang-related mass shooting in Toronto, Canada,¹⁸ Nicole Osbourne James started a blog called, "Guns Get None" targeted at persuading wives and girlfriends of men with guns to participate in a sex strike to end gang violence.¹⁹ James recognized that community conversations following shooting incidents are geared towards identifying programs could help, and how law enforcement should be involved.²⁰

James' blog is an effort to begin conversations about how communities can respond on an individual level to end fatal gang violence. James calls for women to take responsibility for the men in their lives, and to apply the same denial of sex they would use in other situations to end violence.²¹ Further, James' approach can be distinguished from other examples because it focuses on the presence of firearms. The Guns Get None website does refer to the male partners of women, but narrowly pinpoints the threat of violence to other men with firearms. The final outcome of this sex strike is yet to be determined.

Analysis

Sex strikes are typically facilitated by groups of women in response to escalating violent behavior in their communities perpetrated by men. The kinds of violence that sex strikes protest vary between four

different kinds of violence that commonly overlap: gang violence, clan violence, gun violence, and war violence.

Sex strikers organize around community structures that they already participate in (i.e. places of worship, sewing circles, online communities). This likely provides pre-existing support and a communication system to sustain mass action in the form of a sex strike. Frequently the sex strike happens in conjunction with formal structural support and efforts. These supportive structures could be the local or national government, intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations, traditional protests and campaigns, or lobbying efforts. It is likely that the multi-lateral approach to anti-violence seen in these communities discourages retributive actions taken by men to punish the protesting women.

Recognizing that sex strikes are often only one part of multi-lateral anti-violence efforts is vital to assessing the effectiveness of anti-violence tactics. For example, The Strike of the Crossed Legs is commonly credited with the 26.5% decline in homicide rates in 2010. The Strike of the Crossed Legs happened in 2006. Between 2008 and 2010, the Pereira local government partnered with the National Strategy Information Center to implement the Culture of Lawfulness Project. This project was a comprehensive program reaching out to poor communities, schools, workplaces and governmental offices to promote the importance of abiding by laws to achieve a harmonious community. The Culture of Lawfulness Project most likely contributed greatly to the decline in homicide rates, given the project's magnitude and resources. Sensationally attributing Pereira's homicide rate decline to The Strike of the Crossed Legs takes attention away from larger efforts that may have had a greater role in homicide prevention.

Sex strikes bring to light several issues and ideas. Primarily, sex strikes are grassroots efforts sustained by the community of women who are affected by the violence. Sex strikes have seemed to be effective from small localities (i.e. the Dado village) to large scale anti-violence efforts (i.e. Liberian civil war). Though outside entities may provide the space in which the sex strike is organized (UNHCR in Dado, places of worship in Liberia), it is the women of the community who initiate and sustain an effective sex strike. Since action is not imposed on the community, it is likely that there is more acceptance of a sex strike as a tactic.

Another issue that sex strikes address is the male-gendered nature of the violence that affects these women's communities. In all cases of sex strikes, men do not participate because they're the targeted population. However, once a few men have been persuaded to stop community violence, they organized with other men involved to end the violence. During the Strike of the Crossed Legs, striking women noted their partners' association of violence with male virility, and established that the strike was in opposition to that idea. Striking women believed that the responsibility of men should be to their families –not a gang. Sex strikes have not addressed, nor are they associated with female perpetrated violence.

Today, groups of anti-violence activists have organized around the legacy of lysistratic non-action without using it as a tactic. These organizations strive towards an end to violence through community-driven initiatives, adhering to the core goal of many sex strikes, but without initiating an actual sex strike.²²

Conclusion

Sex strikes can be considered effective tools for homicide prevention when used in conjunction with other efforts. In fact, researchers may be unable to determine the percentage of effectiveness of sex strikes because they are so often used in combination with other tactics. Sex strikes discourage homicides by using interpersonal tactics enforced by loved ones, while governmental programming (like The Culture of Lawfulness Project) encompass entire geographic populations to prevent homicides on a larger level. On a smaller scale, like that of Dado village, sex strikes can be the primary homicide prevention tactic, and ultimately stop homicides in the community. The usefulness of a sex strike is dependent upon the nature of

the homicide problem (including homicide type or syndrome), the size of a population, and other coordinated efforts.

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