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Thematic article

Violent orders: materialist-feminist perspectives on sexualized violence in heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism

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Abstract

This paper examines sexualized violence as a societal phenomenon that upholds and stabilizes heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism through a feminist materialist lens. Building on Marxist and queer feminist theories, it argues that sexualized violence is not the 'other' but rather a foundational element reinforcing androcentric, heteronormative, and racialized inequalities in capitalist societies. Capitalist accumulation has historically upheld norms of patriarchy and heteronormativity, relying on unpaid reproductive labor and the regulation of bodies within a gendered division of labor. By focusing on qualitative data from interviews with survivors, the paper reveals how sexualized violence operates across five structural dimensions—the public/private-divide, the order of availability, hierarchical social relations, gender binary, and labor—each of which normalizes and sustains sexualized violence and its silencing within social and economic relations. This framework positions sexualized violence as intrinsic to the (re-)production of heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist systems, suggesting that these structures facilitate and silence such violence as a means of preserving social order.

Keywords: feminist materialism, sexualized violence, silencing, heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism.

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Introduction

Contemporary Western societies are undergoing a "multiple crisis" (Bader et al., 2011; see also Ludwig, 2022a) characterized by a complexity of social transformations[1]. This complexity manifests in urgent care crises, financial crises, the climate crisis, and the crisis of democracy with its marked authoritarian anti-feminist discourses, rise in queer- and transphobia, and assaults on bodily autonomy. All these crises are highly gendered: They disproportionately affect women, particularly Black, racialized queer (and) trans women, exacerbating socio-economic and ecological challenges on these groups, and reinforcing androcentric, heteronormative, racist, and ableist inequalities (see Bales, 1999; Fraser, 2016; O'Brien, 2020; Holborow, 2024).

Feminist theory has significantly contributed to understanding these gendered crises not just as side effects, but as integral to the functioning of "cis-hetero patriarchy" (Beier, 2023, authors' transl.) in capitalism. As Nancy Fraser argues, capitalist societies inherently possess a "social-reproductive 'crisis tendency' or contradiction": while social reproduction enables capital accumulation, capitalism's drive for unlimited growth destabilizes these very processes (Fraser, 2016: 99). Marxist feminist and queer contributions have highlighted that capitalism, intertwined with gender, sexuality, and race, is not only built upon crises but also on violence: Since capitalism's emergence, capitalist accumulation has consistently produced and sustained androcentric (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; James, 1974; Federici, 1975; Vogel, 1983 [2013]), cis-heteronormative (Delphy, 1980; Wittig, 1992; Hennessy, 2018 [2000]; Chitty, 2020; Raha, 2021), racist (Davis, 2019 [1981]; Bhattacharyya, 2018), ableist (Gleeson, 1997; Mitchell & Snyder, 2010; Jaffee, 2016), and (post-) colonial regimes (Gago, 2020; Segato, 2021; Cavallero et al., 2024). Violence has been central to these processes. Early Marxist feminists like Silvia Federici (1975, 2004), Selma James (1974), Mariarosa Dalla Costa (1972), and Maria Mies (1986) have illustrated how unpaid reproductive labor, organized along gendered and racialized lines of domination, are crucial in maintaining a capitalist economic order, revealing the gendered division of labor and the heteronormative nuclear family and marriage as fundamental pillars of capitalism. Federici describes capitalist accumulation as a "dialectic of accumulation and destruction of labor-power" (Federici, 2004: 17), where violence became visible as a "structural element […] of capital accumulation" (Federici, 2004: 82) for stabilizing patriarchal power.

While public discourses often address 'crises', some fundamental crises remain unspoken. A particularly troubling example is sexualized violence and its inherent threat, especially to

[1] The text is based on the research project "Explorative Studie zu sexualisierter Gewalt im sozialen Nahraum in Südtirol" at the Center for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the University of Innsbruck. The project is funded by Stiftung Südtiroler Sparkasse, the Autonomous Province of South Tyrol, and the University of Innsbruck. https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/geschlechterforschung/projekte/sexualisierte-gewalt-in-sudtirol/.

women, queer, trans, Black, racialized (and), disabled women. This phenomenon does not merely represent a series of tragic individual instances, but a crisis characterized by systematic gender-specific violations, threats, and even killings—as alarming national and international statistics demonstrate. Although these statistics often fail to capture most verbal, emotional, social or economic experiences of sexualized violence, and rely on international estimates (see FRA, 2014), they still highlight feminicides as the tip of the iceberg of violence against women and girls. According to an UN report (UNODC, 2023), 89,000 women and girls were intentionally murdered worldwide in 2023 — the highest rate in two decades, indicating a troubling rise in gender-based violence. That over 133 women are killed daily by violence within their families underlines the need to address sexualized violence as an ongoing international crisis within capitalism.

Given this context, in this paper we develop a theoretical perspective on sexualized violence from a materialist-feminist perspective. We argue that sexualized violence is not a 'deviation', but rather a structural mechanism that plays a key role in maintaining a heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist 'order'. Here our argumentation builds upon the scholarly work of feminist Marxism (Mies, 1986, Federici, 2004). Silvia Federici and Maria Mies conceptualize gender violence as crucial element of capitalism: "If violence against women is not accidental but part of modern capitalist patriarchy, then we have to explain why this is so. If we reject a biologistic explanation — as I do — we have to look for reasons which are central to the functioning of the system as such." (Mies, 1986: 27).

Following Mies and Federici, the text rests on the premise that violence lies at the core of patriarchal capitalism and that patriarchal capitalism exists in a state of permanent crisis and must stabilize itself through violence. While some early Marxist feminists critically linked capitalism, gender inequalities and violence, they have been found to be limited in their binary static conception of gender. Queer Marxist theories have expanded on these perspectives. They challenged the idea of a gender binary and scrutinized how gender itself is constructed and enforced through capitalist relations. Therefore, in the following, we refer to feminist and queer-feminist Marxist approaches which allows us to highlight how capitalism shapes bodies as manifestations of power relations (Floyd, 2009; Drucker, 2015; Chitty, 2020; Jaffe, 2020) and how the 'private' sphere and binary gender normativities play a key role for the social reproduction of a capitalist society (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; James, 1974; Delphy, 1980; Davis, 2019 [1981]; Wittig, 1992; Federici, 2004; Raha, 2021).The overall aim of this article is to offer a conceptual framework that draws on existing feminist and queer materialist theories on gender violence that situates sexualized violence at the root of the structures of heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist society. We view the various forms of sexualized violence, such as street harassment, sexual abuse, rape, or feminicide, against feminized, queer, trans, racialized, and ableized

bodies as forms of violence rooted in social structures that are part of a heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist society. This take on violence is not meant as an explanation or excuse for concrete violent acts of individuals, it is rather a proposal to foreground the role of social structures in normalizing sexualized violence.

As Rebecca Hall has stated, conceptualizing gender violence from a materialist-feminist perspective encounters the challenge that such an approach aims at "bring(ing) together different forms of gender violence, on the one hand, and (to address) the divergences that make broad claims around gender violence not only potentially inaccurate but often problematic and exclusionary, on the other" (Hall, 2023: 323-324). In order to address this tension, Hall proposes to differentiate between "structural violence and embodied violence" (2023: 324). The former "includes acts, processes, institutions, materialities, and ideologies that establish, perpetuate, or enact harmful exploitative or oppressive power relations" (2023: 324), the latter are "emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and financial abuse" (2023: 324). According to Hall, the relationship between the two dimensions is "dialectical" (2023: 324): they are "intertwined, permeable, and at times indistinguishable in practice" (2023: 324).

We take up Halls differentiaton as the analytical backbone of our contribution: For the purpose of offering an understanding of sexualized violence as being embedded in the structures of heteronormative-androcentric capitalism ("structural violence"), we refer to existing literature from feminist and queer-feminist Marxist scholars on violence as core pillar of capitalism. In order to focus on the lived experience of violence and the different forms of it ("embodied violence"), we support the theoretical arguments by empirical findings from a qualitative study on sexualized violence, based on interviews with survivors[2]. When writing this text, the study consisted of 25 interviews with 22 cis-women and three cis-men between the ages of 20 and 70 years who experienced sexualized violence in different settings of close intimate spaces: by family members, partners in intimate heterosexual and queer relationships, by a priest, a lawyer, peers, a teacher, an employer and the head of an association. Seven additional interviews were conducted with experts working in the field. The interviews were conducted in South Tyrol, a predominantly conservative, white, Catholic, economically prosperous, patriarchal, and cis-heteronormative region in Northern Italy.

The interviews are part of an explorative study on sexualized violence in South Tyrol. So far, such a study does not exist. The interviews[3] were conducted in both Italian and German by white, female-read researchers; the participants of the study are predominantly white. The timing of the experiences of sexualized violence range from infancy through early adulthood into

[2] For more information about the study, entitled "Explorative Studie zu sexualisierter Gewalt im sozialen Nahraum in Südtirol", see: https://www.uibk.ac.at/de/geschlechterforschung/projekte/sexualisierte-gewalt-in-sudtirol/.

[3] All interviews used for this article are with the authors.

participants' mid-twenties. On a temporal scale, participants recounted experiences of sexualized violence spanning from the 1970s up until the 2020s. The study applies Udo Kuckartz's (2012) content analysis and explores sexualized violence from a macro-theoretical perspective, focusing on socio-political structures that enable sexualized violence and the silencing of it. The narratives reveal how heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism organizes family, labor, bodies, relationships and property to facilitate sexualized violence and its silencing[4].

Taking up Halls' approach of analytically differentiating between structural and embodied violence, in the following we argue that sexualized violence not only stems from but also operates as a tool for reproducing heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist structures along five dimensions: (1) the public/private-divide, (2) the dimension of availability, (3) the dimension of hierarchical social relations, (4) the dimension of gender binarity, and (5) the dimension of labor. In each dimension, we bring together already existing feminist and queer-feminist literature on capitalism and violence in order to describe key structural elements of a heteronormative-androcentric capitalism whereas referring to the interviews will enable us to exemplify the concrete form of the individual dimensions in a specific geopolitical context (South Tyrol). This approach will help us to navigate what Hall identifies as two analytical tensions while discussing gendered violence: first, that violence is conceptually difficult to pin down, as definitions often swing between being overly broad or too restrictive (Hall, 2023: 324); second, that addressing gendered violence risks reinforcing stereotypes of feminized weakness and passivity, even as it seeks to highlight structural vulnerabilities (Hall, 2023: 325).

(Re-)Producing the Separation of 'Public' and 'Private'

Feminist Marxist scholarship has demonstrated that the separation of the public and private sphere, which emerged with the onset of capitalism, is a key pillar for stabilizing patriarchal power relations and capitalism (Bakker & Gill, 2003; Haug, 2015). Separating and dichotomizing the private and public spheres frames social reproduction — activities and experiences considered 'feminine' such as caring and nurturing — as capitalism's 'other' and renders care work invisible and irrelevant to production, despite its indispensability for capitalism's reproduction. The separation between public and private not only devalues (feminized) care work, it also reinforces a patriarchal normality that frames the heteronormative family as an "endlessly cited elsewhere

[4] We would like to thank the interview partners for sharing their knowledge with us. Of course, all interviews are anonymized.

of political public discourse, a promised haven that distracts citizens from the unequal conditions of their political and economic lives" (Berlant & Warner, 1998: 553).

While serving as capitalism's 'other' includes the exploitation of feminized labor necessary for producing a home and an emotionalized sphere of intimacy, more central to our argument is that through the capitalist and gendered divide of the public and private, the private sphere becomes a domain in which it is presumed that men have access to feminized care work and bodies—as if these were 'natural' gifts they have a right to claim. This patriarchal construction of privacy rests upon an underlying ideology of gendered appropriation of bodies and care work. The fact that marital rape was not legally recognized as violence in many Western European countries until the 1980[5], starkly illustrates how the patriarchal separation of public and private spheres upholds male entitlement to women's bodies.

This was upheld on the basis of two assumptions as feminist contributions on the gendered dimension of the public/private-distinction have revealed (Pateman, 1983; Sauer, 1997): that husbands have the right to access the bodies of 'their' wives and that the private sphere is the antipode of the public sphere, outside the reach of state intervention. Although legal reforms, in part driven by feminist struggles, have led to the recognition of marital rape as a crime in many countries, within heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism the private sphere is structured by two dynamics: it remains a sphere in which men can potentially access, exert power over and control other bodies; and whatever happens within this sphere is expected to silently remain within it, away from the public. We argue that this patriarchal construction of the private sphere is inherently violent because it is built upon gendered power dynamics that grant the presumed 'right to appropriate' bodies on one hand while denying autonomy on the other. Furthermore, the private sphere also relies upon a silencing structure. Due to these two aspects, we consider it as structure that can enable sexualized violence.

The dynamics of silencing are particularly evident in private spheres such as familial heteronormative settings. As one survivor explains, among her peers, there is an unspoken rule to keep problems within the household, maintaining an outward appearance of normalcy while hiding internal conflicts. She explains that although relationship issues are known within families, they are never discussed publicly: "You talk about problems internally, among yourselves, but you never let them come out" (Martina, authors' transl.). This expectation to handle conflicts privately reinforces structures of silence and isolation, which makes it difficult for survivors to seek help. They (re-)produce the heteronormative family as a site in which violence is both perpetuated and kept invisible. Such private spheres, therefore, not only enable but also conceal sexualized violence, perpetuating a cycle of secrecy and suppression.

[5] In our case study – South Tyrol – marital rape has been recognized as a criminal offense in 1996, following the nationwide legal reform in Italy.

We argue that the concepts of ‘privacy’ and ‘intimacy’ are not only maintained in ostensibly private spaces, such as the family or household, but may also be strategically produced in spaces typically considered public, such as schools, churches, or workplaces. The violent appropriation of another’s body is facilitated through the deliberate creation of a sphere of intimacy and control in a similar way to that inside of the family. Within this constructed sphere, a gradual right of disposal over the other’s body can become established. We further develop this framework, and propose embracing that the ‘private sphere’ can be intentionally produced as a space for the benefit of patriarchal domination. The artificial boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ can be manipulated to legitimize and perpetuate forms of sexualized violence in both traditionally private and clearly public contexts. These dynamics not only reinforce heteronormative control by regulating gender and sexuality within both public and private spheres but also actively discourage any deviation from these norms by enforcing rigid binaries and excluding those who refuse to conform (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Floyd, 2009; Drucker, 2015; Jaffe, 2020).

As example of the gradual establishment of a right of disposal over other people’s bodies, we refer to the experiences of Klara who worked as a domestic servant at the age of 16. Klara and her own family perceived her job as opportunity for advancement, which put the perpetrator in an advantageous position. He would strategically “flatter” her (authors’ transl.) and gain her trust through small gestures like “wink[ing] at her as she walks” (authors’ transl.) and through gifts such as chocolates or “bath foam” (authors’ transl.), which he wanted to show her “how to use” (authors’ transl.). These actions established a gradual claim of control over Klara’s body, blurring the lines between closeness and coercion. Klara emphasizes that “this [...] started very, very slowly, gradually” (authors’ transl.). These practices create a continuum of power and violence that systematically weakens and ultimately breaks the boundary between proximity and distance. Klara did not want to accept the gifts, but she had to, which highlights the power imbalance and subtle coercion she was subjected to. The fact that the gifts were given in the ‘intimacy’ of a closed room, rather than in public, created an atmosphere of intimacy and control that allowed the perpetrator to exercise his power undisturbed and to ensure the availability of Klara’s body, which we further elaborate upon in Chapter 2.

As the broad body of feminist scholarship on the public/private-divide has revealed, these ‘spheres’ are not given spaces, but rather, powerful constructs that interfere with each other: The private sphere is politically structured, and the liberal-capitalist conception of the public cannot exist without it. Separating and dichotomizing the private and public is a powerful mechanism of the heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Pateman, 1983; Dahlerup, 1987; Federici, 2004). “Public and private are therefore not to be understood as opposite poles, but as interlinked aspects, which are, however, effectively linked via the

mechanism of separation and the suppression or denial of this connection become effective." (Bargetz, 2016: 74; author's transl.) Furthermore, the distinction is a fluid one (Armstrong & Squires, 2002): The 'distinction' between the public and private is an extremely powerful "pattern of organization and perception of reality, of politics and society. Public and private are organizing concepts that regulate social relationships, that permit, prohibit, allow" (Sauer, 1997: 37, author's transl.). Referring to the role that the public/private-divide plays for enabling sexualized violence, we take this feminist critique even further: Spaces of privacy and intimacy are not only spheres of exploitation (of care work) but can also serve as spheres to exert power and control. The creation of a sphere of intimacy can also be exploited as a structural precondition for sexualized violence. At the same time, the private sphere is a powerful mechanism to silence sexualized violence based on the assumption that it is a personal, intimate, natural space.

(Re-)Producing a Social Order of Violent Availability

The logic of capitalist domination relies on the expropriation and alienation of bodies by assigning them specific gendered and economic roles, ensuring their availability for capitalist exploitation. Marx has argued that labor power and workers are alienated through the capitalist mode of production (Marx, 1977 [1844]: 71-78). According to Marx, capitalism strips bodies of their autonomy and subsumes them under the logics of capital accumulation. In this process, workers are forced to submit to an external and uncontrollable order, making the labor process a terrain of self-alienation. The worker "feels at home when he (sic) is not working, and when he (sic) is working he (sic) does not feel at home" (Marx, 1977 [1844]: 71). Formally, the worker is the "free owner" of their own labor power, and therefore of their own body, but in reality the worker is compelled to make this labor power available to the buyer for a certain period (Marx, 1976 [1867]). This alienation compels individuals to distance themselves from their own bodies during the labor process, effectively placing them in the service of capital.

While Marx describes a relevant dynamic of capitalism, he ignores how this logic of property in general and of bodies in particular is highly racialized and gendered. Going beyond Marx, feminist, Black and postcolonial theorists have pointed out that the assumption of bodies as property has its genealogy in slavery. "Racial domination has also allowed whites to hoard the benefits of the material labor necessary to maintain life and to secure the physical and emotional needs of the body itself, as, tragically, the benefits of the forced and coerced labor of black women were among the advantages that accrued to the white body as a consequence of racial

domination" (Threadcraft, 2016, 153; see also Singh, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2018; Davis, 2019 [1981]). To conceive of others' bodies as potential property, which some have the right to possess and access, is already a violent logic inherent in heteronormative-patriarchal racial capitalism.

Eva von Redecker's concept of 'phantom possession' (2020) illustrates how capitalist societies today still rest upon the assumption that some subjects are entitled to make racialized, feminized, and sexualized bodies available. The bodies that von Redecker describes as "phantom possession" are not recognized as autonomous, but are treated as resources available and controllable for and by others. Feminized, queer (or) racialized bodies are not only marginalized by their gendered and racialized status, but also by their deviation from white heteronormative norms. Within this logic, feminized, queer, (and) racialized bodies become objects that are systematically devalued and instrumentalized in heteronormative-patriarchal racial capitalism. The idea that other bodies are seen as potential objects to which some people hold a right to access and ownership is firmly rooted in the "claims of superiority" of patriarchal-racial capitalism (Redecker, 2020: 15, authors' transl.).

Thus, heteronormative-patriarchal racial capitalism not only creates an order of production but also an order of availability: according to the dominant racist, gendered, heteronormative, capitalist ideology, some bodies are considered accessible, which renders the bodies of racialized, feminized, sexualized 'others' as potential objects that can be made available (Redecker, 2020: 40). Here the entanglement of race, gender, sexuality, class and disability shape the way some bodies can be made available. We consider this order of availability as violent because it fundamentally denies racialized, feminized, and sexualized people autonomy over their bodies. Assuming that the 'phantom possession' of others' bodies is the "basic foundation of modern identities" (Redecker, 2020: 41, authors' transl.), the logic of viewing others' bodies as disposable inscribes violence as the cornerstone of patriarchal-racial capitalism. This logic of violence manifests through sexualized violence, racist discrimination, and economic exploitation, presupposing the availability and devaluation of certain bodies as given.

Sexualized violence reinforces the assumption that certain bodies – especially those that do not conform to an androcentric, cis-heteronormative, white ideal, which Chiara Bottici (2024) describes as people of "second gender" (authors' transl.) in a patriarchal order – are always potentially available for social reproduction and sexualized exploitation. The logic of bodily availability serves as an enabling structure for sexualized violence, which is yet another point of property-based violence that can be seen as an expression of 'phantom property'. The interviews in our study repeatedly revealed that survivors of sexualized violence experienced that their bodies were degraded as objects made available to others. Due to the circumstance that the interviewees in our study are predominant white, we cannot reveal how gender and race intersect in rendering bodies available. However, following the work of Davis (1981), Mama

(1989), Threadcraft (2016) and many other Black feminist scholars, we explicitly want to stress the role that the entanglement of race, gender, and sexuality plays in rendering Black and racialized female, queer, non-binary and trans bodies 'available' within the violent grammar of the heteronormative-patriarchal racial capitalism. Claudio, who was sexually abused by both parents until the age of 16, describes how his mother perceived his body as ‘property’ in order to gain control over her own life. He describes that his mother “couldn’t control anything in her life, she couldn’t control what happened at home, she couldn’t even control herself, and so she had a child, because according to her it solved her life, it gave her a purpose for getting up in the morning and it also gave her a possession.” (authors’ transl.) This phantasm of the body of others as possessable shows how property logics and violence are intertwined in patriarchal, capitalist and racist orders of disposability. These entangled relations of power and domination act as enabling structures where “the owner’s freedom entitles him to arbitrariness” (Redecker, 2020: 40, authors’ transl.).

As (queer) feminist Marxist scholars have argued, the capitalist, racist, patriarchal, heteronormative order of availability is stabilized, reproduced and normalized through various modes of disciplining bodies which need to be grasped as forms of structural violence. Early feminist Marxist scholars such as Silvia Federici interpret the disciplining of female bodies as “[o]ne of the preconditions for capitalist development” (Federici, 2004: 133), because capitalism also requires biopolitics and a gendered division of labor. Queer theorists further argue that disciplining queer bodies operates as a form of ‘normative violence’ and that biopolitics enforce one to adhere to rigid norms of gender and sexuality (Fütty, 2019). We agree with these contributions, yet would further emphasize that continually exposing feminized, racialized (and) queer bodies to disciplining ideals of femininity, masculinity, normative sexuality and powerful biopolitics normalizes a continuum of violence. We view the normalization of this continuum of violence as another structure that enables sexualized violence, as it obscures the ‘crossing of boundaries’ as an act of power and control, particularly against those who deviate from cis-heteronormative white ideals. Coming back to Hall’s distinction between structural and embodied violence (2023: 324), we propose to frame the continuum of violence as crucial for both dimensions of violence: violence as a continuum unfolds on a structural level in and between “acts, processes, institutions, materialities, and ideologies that establish, perpetuate, or enact harmful exploitative or oppressive power relations” (2023: 324) as well as on an embodied level as “emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and financial abuse” (2023: 324).

The disciplining of bodies normalizes their potential for sexualized exploitation. In our interviews, sexual assaults and violent social structures were often normalized in the every-day-lives of the interviewees. Linda, who was sexually abused by her father and his friend, describes how boundary violations were legitimized in her surroundings: “[I]t often happened that

someone touched me, [...] on my knees or somewhere. My friend's father, my grandfather, my father's father [...] smothered me with kisses" (authors' transl.). This permanent sexualization led Linda to see violence as 'normal': "[T]his man always got under my smock and [...] attacked my vagina [...]. I didn't dare say anything. I was used to it" (authors' transl.). Similarly, Dora, abused by five classmates and a teacher, describes: "[I] grew up with that [...], especially through my uncles. [...] In conversation, too. [...] Very vulgar. And I thought that was normal. From an early age" (authors' transl.). Such normalization and the persistent potential to sexualize and appropriate (feminized) bodies perpetuate a continuum of violence. This reflects what Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972: 47) term the "productivity of discipline". The disciplining of (feminized) bodies upholds this continuum, in which sexualized violence is the extreme outcome of everyday disciplining. This continuum is maintained through practices like sexist 'jokes', sexualization of female bodies in the media, or the disavowal of queer identities that are fundamental components of the patriarchal structure that enables sexualized violence. It embeds sexualized violence within a gendered regime that disciplines feminized, queer (and) racialized bodies for patriarchal and capitalist purposes and normalizes their potential availability for sexual exploitation. Here, also the interviews of our study support Hall's argument that the dimension of structural and embodied violence are inseparable and dialectically intertwined (Hall, 2023: 324). In relation to sexualized violence, the specific effect of this order of availability is that it blurs the boundaries between voluntary availability and coercive access. The order suggests that feminized, queer (and) racialized bodies are perpetually available – not just for economic, but also for sexual exploitation.

(Re-)Producing an Order of Hierarchical Social Relations

Contrary to its promise of formal equality, heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism rests upon hierarchical social relations formed through classed, gendered, heteronormative, racialized inequalities (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Davis, 2019 [1981]; Singh, 2016; Raha, 202). At the same time, these structural hierarchies are made invisible through capitalist, gendered, heteronormative, racist and colonial ideologies. As Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci has argued, capitalism requires the consensus of the majority of the population despite being a social formation of inequalities and hierarchies. In everyday practices of civil society, for instance "libraries, schools, circles, and clubs of various kinds, down to the architecture, the layout of the streets, and the names of the same" (Gramsci, 1992: 374, authors transl.), worldviews of what is supposed to be a 'good and normal' social order are articulated and disseminated that lead

people to agree with and execute them. One of the key insights of Gramsci's theory is that structural hierarchies are not only reproduced by force, but also by a social consensus to norms that legitimate those hierarchies (Ludwig, 2022b): heteronormative norms about sexuality, capitalist labor norms, or androcentric norms about relationships that are distributed in the media, schools or culture, guarantee a normalization of hierarchal social relations.

As research on sexualized violence has revealed, the majority of incidents of violence takes place in close social settings, and respectively in settings where the perpetrator and the survivor know each other prior to the violent act (see, for example, the contributions in: Helfferich et al., 2016). As this research shows, sexualized violence in these settings always rests upon hierarchical relations: between father/parents and children, social authorities such as teachers/priests/trainers/judges and youth, employer/supervisor and worker, higher earners and financially dependent in queer relationships, or male and female partners in a heterosexual relationship. Also Hall argues that "(a)t a social level, not only is violence met with power, but violence finds power. Violence is used to assert (political, ecomomic, social, ideological, embodied) domination and suppress that which challenges that domination" (Hall, 2023: 326). In our empirical study we encountered two ways perpetrators take advantage of structural hierarchies and dependencies: either directly through their social position by forcing the survivor into a violent situation; or by additionally creating a net of emotional dependency around the existing hierarchy prior to the violent act. This is done, for example, by gradually creating secrets or harrassing the person with gifts, as we saw in Klara's instance earlier.

Here, a materialist-(queer-)feminist perspective allows us to define the social hierarchies inherent in heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism as the structural precondition for sexualized violence. Androcentric, heteronormative and class privileges on the one hand and emotional, social, and financial dependencies and the lack of privileges on the other hand, create a structure that perpetrators make use of when committing acts of sexualized violence. Following Gramsci, we argue that the normalization of hierarchies in society also normalizes sexualized violence as a possibility within social hierarchies. These social hierarchies and social relations of dependency are the precondition for sexualized violence and are not only reproduced through coercion, but also through a broad social consensus: the power and privilege of heterosexual husbands, male bosses, priests, teachers and trainers are rooted in a broad range of social practices that strengthen (the normalization of) their dominance. We view these practices as micro-practices that organize and reproduce consensus to those structural hierarchies – often in highly routinized manners. This constant repetition of consensus builds a network that normalizes social hierarchies and privileges that we in turn grasp as enabling structures of sexualized violence.

As empirical research has foregrounded, many survivors of sexualized violence remain silent about the experienced harassment and violence, because they assume that nobody would believe them (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Kavemann et al., 2016). We also encountered this tendency in our empirical study: "You have to defend yourself that this has happened, because they don't believe you. And even people [...] close to you, whom you could actually trust. Even your own relatives" (Katharina, authors' transl.). Approaching sexualized violence from a materialist-feminist perspective allows us to show that the survivors' assumptions that 'nobody would believe them' is also structural: the lack of confidence results from social hierarchies and consensus to them. Here, the intersectionality of gender, class, race, sexuality, age, and disability shape how survivors are believed or not. In Klara's case, the perpetrator's class privilege makes her, as a domestic worker in his household, more vulnerable and leads her to question her own credibility. A similar dynamic appears in Lu's assumption of sexualized violence in a queer intimate relationship, in which her partner constantly devalued her abilities, and created emotional dependency. Lu's belief that no one would believe her stems from society's lower acceptance of queer relationships, which makes it even less likely that her experience would be taken seriously. Approaching sexualized violence from a structural perspective also frames it as a practice of securing, reproducing and normalizing social hierarchies.

(Re-)Producing a Violent Order of Gender Binarity

A key insight of feminist Marxist approaches for analyzing sexualized violence is that it does not merely enforce male power over female bodies, it also constructs and stabilizes gendered and racialized embodied distinctions (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 2004; Hennessy, 2018 [2000]). Queer and trans studies have extended these critiques of a bodily regime of social order by going beyond the assumption of a 'natural body' and by shifting the attention to the ways in which bodies are violently constituted, produced, reproduced, connected, separated, and coerced into labor or excluded from the satisfaction of needs in various ways (Hennessy, 2018 [2000]; Chitty, 2020; Jaffe, 2020). Building on these insights, we argue from a materialist-queer-feminist perspective that sexualized violence is central to this process and serves to uphold this binary gender order by determining who counts as a 'legitimate' survivor and whose suffering is rendered invisible. The social processes that render some as survivor and others as invisible, are deeply racialized, classed, and sexualized (Davis, 1981, Lykke, 2015).

The ongoing crisis of patriarchy has given rise to a so-called "crisis of masculinity" (Schiedel, 2019). Masculinist movements often argue that men, particularly in the face of feminist

initiatives, have become ‘a disadvantaged group’. Anxiety around this so-called crisis masks a deeper reality: patriarchy is struggling to maintain itself amidst social shifts (Fraser, 2016), and violence remains a crucial mechanism for stabilizing its foundation. A key dimension of this violence is the reassertion of a rigid binary gender order that naturalizes and upholds normative masculinity and femininity through coercion.

Within this order, white masculinity is constructed as the souvereign subject, while femininity is positioned as subordinate, reinforcing patriarchal structures of exploitation. Historically, this dynamic has been legitimized through institutions like marriage, which, as Christine Delphy argues, put husbands and wives into antagonistic economic classes, thereby cementing the female subject as both propertyless and possessable (Delphy, 1980). The binary gender order entails both an ideological and a material level, which uses gender-specific norms that prioritize dominance and subordination to regulate labor, desire, and social belonging (Hennessy, 2018 [2000]).

Sexualized violence operates as a regulating and stabilizing instrument in (re-)producing and maintaining the binary gender order and its associated power dynamics. Raewyn Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (1995) illustrates how the binary gender system determines who is permitted to exert, and who is expected to submit to strength and dominance. Constructing femininity as inherently passive and weak positions feminized bodies as natural and ‘legitimate’ targets for violence, reinforcing their subordinate role within the gender hierarchy. Simultaneously, white, heteronormative, abled-bodied, cis-masculinized bodies, associated with strength and dominance, are perceived as capable of defending themselves. One of the consequences of this construction of hegemonic masculinity is the erasure or invalidation of the sexualized violence experienced by men or other non-feminized survivors. This is reflected in responses to male-perceived survivors of violence in homosexual relationships like: “But how, you were raped? You‘re a man, and you couldn’t defend yourself?” (Fiumefreddo, expert interview, 2024). Such reactions not only dismiss the experiences of male survivors, they also uphold the notion that vulnerability and victimhood are exclusively feminized traits, thus reinforcing the violent logics of the binary gender system.

As a consequence of this rigid gender order, non-binary, trans and queer bodies are rendered (more) invisible as potential survivors of sexualized violence. This invisibilization is not incidental but structurally embedded in what Hennessy describes as “heterogendered social matrix” (Hennessy, 2018 [2000]: 25), an order that categorizes subjects as ‘male’ or ‘female’ and assigns them social and economic roles based on binary gender norms and heterosexual desire. As queer and trans studies have highlighted, the disciplining of bodies within heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism does not stop at the control of feminized bodies but regulates all bodies through cis- and heteronormative frameworks (Butler, 1993; Fütty, 2019). As a result, those who conform to

these norms are more legible as survivors than those who do not. Halberstam's concept of "female masculinity" (2019 [1998]) underscores how bodies that fall outside the conventional male/female binary are systematically excluded from being acknowledged as legitimate survivors of violence. For example, trans women who endure sexualized violence often face reactions that reflect the belief that their experiences do not count as 'real violence' because they are misgendered (Fiumefreddo, expert interview, 2024). This dismissal of their experiences stems from rigid, essentialist views of gender that dictate who can and cannot be perceived as vulnerable. Such views not only perpetuate the erasure of non-binary, trans and queer bodies from narratives of sexualized violence, they also reinforce the harmful assumption that victimhood is inherently linked to cisgender femininity. Consequently, these individuals are denied empathy, protection and support, further entrenching their marginalization within a patriarchal and heteronormative framework.

Sexualized violence is not just a symptom of the patriarchal crisis, but a deliberate strategy to maintain its order. Corporeality – whether one is perceived as cis-man, cis-woman, trans woman, or trans man – determines who is seen as a 'legitimate' survivor of sexualized violence and whose experiences are rendered unimaginable or impossible. By (re-)producing a violent order of gender binarity, patriarchy reinforces its structural power, legitimizing violence against those who challenge or do not fit its norms. This explains why women are most often killed after leaving their partners, or why queer and trans individuals experience disproportionately high rates of sexualized violence – because their very existence threatens the stability of the patriarchal order.

(Re-)Producing An Order of Labor

A key critique of feminist Marxist scholars is that capitalism's exploitation cannot only be found in wage labor and its ability of producing surplus labor as Marx has argued. Rather, capitalism also rests upon structural exploitation in the reproductive sphere. Capitalism requires a gendered and heteronormative division of labor that views reproductive labor as the responsibility of women. The division of labor is institutionalized through marriage and legitimated through ideologies of assumed natural gender 'differences'. According to Lise Vogel, capitalism demands "the privatization of reproductive labor within the household" and employs "legal and policy measures to maintain and reinforce existing gender and sexual hierarchies" (2013 [1983]: 146). These measures aim to naturalize the role of women as primary reproducers and to obscure the fact that their labor forms the foundation for capital accumulation. Although reproductive labor is hardly recognized as labor, it forms the backbone of capitalism, as feminist Marxist scholars have

argued for decades. In other words, heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism's reproduction is based upon the invisible and unequally distributed labor that is largely performed by women.

Contributions from queer studies have further deepened this feminist analysis. Building upon Judith Butler's (1993) work on the performativity of gender, queer studies scholars Brigitta Kuster and Renate Lorenz introduced the notion of "sexual labor" (2007, authors' transl.). Sexual labor refers to the effort required to produce and maintain a sexualized and gendered identity, both in the context of wage labor and in unpaid reproductive work. Sexual labor is also the effort to produce (or negotiate) a hegemonic understanding of a gendered and sexualized normality. Sexual labor therefore always includes what Kuster and Lorenz describe as "normalization labor" (ibid.: 173, authors' transl.), because sexual labor obscures the fact that gender and sexual identities result from performative acts and not naturally given, but are the result of labor. Volker Woltersdorff (2012) has further developed this argument by introducing the concept of a division of sexual labor to illustrate the unequal distribution of sexual labor. Although within a heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist society, everyone must perform sexual labor, not everyone must put in the same effort. Sexual labor is "particularly demanded of those marked as deviants or variants of the norm, i.e. who are not white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, cissexual or able-bodied. [...] The greater the rupture with normality, the more intensive the sexual labor is that [queer existences] must perform in order to recreate themselves as a stable identity in their outward presentation." (Woltersdorff, 2012: 120; authors' transl.).

Drawing on these insights, in the following, by referring to our study, we reflect how invisible and unequal labor also structures how sexualized violence is socially handled. Out of 25 interviews, none of the perpetrators had faced any legal or social consequence. By contrast, all survivors of sexualized violence interviewed expressed that the act(s) of violence had severe impacts on their lives. This is not only the case in South Tyrol, because despite decades of feminist struggles to politicize sexualized violence, the majority of sexual assaults, harassments and rape globally remain without any consequences for the perpetrator. The majority of cases of sexualized violence are neither brought to court nor made public (FRA, 2014; FRA, 2021: 79). This corresponds with the findings of our study. Kleo experienced sexualized violence as a minor by a family friend and stated: "No, in no ways any consequences [for the perpetrator]. Nothing. In the end, he just went on with his life" (authors' transl.). On the other hand, survivors must contend with the consequences their entire life. Katharina describes the consequences of being raped as an 18 year-old by a stranger: "I often hurt myself, I tried to hit myself and also with scissors, I have cut my stomach […]. I truly had a compulsing washing. Because I felt so disgusted." (authors' transl.) And Martina, who was raped by her partner, sums up the lack of reactions in her surroundings even after she spoke about the violence she experienced: "I have not receive an apology, I have not received any money, I have not received anything." (authors' transl.)

In order to make the unjust and structural dimension of these fundamentally different consequences for the survivors versus the perpetrators tangible, we propose to frame it in terms of labor: In a society that structurally produces and silences sexualized violence, there exists an unequal and exploitative form of labor – on various dimensions[6]. Survivors of violence perform the labor of self-care, such as going to therapy in order to develop coping mechanisms. Here it is particularly important to point out that quite often the possibilities of sufficient structural support are still lacking. This includes support in dealing with the consequences, along with managing the financial and emotional costs. Recognizing, contextualizing and understanding one's own experiences of violence is also labor—particularly within heteronormative-patriarchal racist capitalist societies that structurally normalize violence. It is labor to learn a "grammar of violence", as one of the survivors in our interviews stated (Claudio, authors' transl.), and to learn to talk about the experience of violence, especially since heteronormative-patriarchal racist capitalist societies silence this knowledge. Labor is also required for building solidarity networks with other survivors for supporting one another.

Furthermore, labor is also needed to ensure that one's experiences are credible. Below we see how survivors of violence encounter structural obstacles. By doing so, this labor becomes apparent, especially when people report the offense and assume the enormous burden of taking it to court. Here, labor also means transcending the hegemonic public/private-divide that acts as if things experienced in 'private' sphere should not enter the 'public' sphere.

In a heteronormative-patriarchal racist capitalist society, the labor of coping with violence is viewed as the responsibility of survivors. The normalization and silencing of violence shifts the burden of coping with violent experiences to survivors, creating an unjust division of labor. This leaves the survivors to bear the consequences of the violence and also perform the labor caused by the perpetrators. The perpetrators clearly cause multiple forms of labor; yet again social structures organize this division of labor in an unjust manner. For instance, the sweeping normalization of gendered hierarchies and the (female) bodies are social phenomena that structurally support this unjust division of labor. This labor remains invisible, because it is neither seen nor recognized as such. A lack of social support and spaces to discuss experiences of sexualized violence further silence survivors. Dora, who was abused as a child by her father, who in turn abused Dora's children, recalls how her ex-husband maintained a friendly relationship with her father, even though he knew of his violence: "[T]hat was really bad for me. And I also told my husband. But he didn't really take it that way. And even after that, he always drank with him [...]. And that's just the way it is for me, where it seems to me that if he had stood behind me, he wouldn't have done something like that." (authors' transl.)

[6] These considerations were further elaborated in Volgger (2024).

The labor survivors take on is performed between individuals or sometimes only within one individual, which means it always entails a social component. Even though this labor remains invisible and is unrecognized as labor, survivors of sexualized violence assume a social task as responsible for healing, moving on, coping and explaining the violence that has been done to them. This social task should actually be taken care of by social institutions, infrastructures and practices. Yet, while it has broader structural foundations, as labor it remains highly individualized.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show that sexualized violence is deeply rooted in social structures of heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist societies. It further aimed to demonstrate that sexualized violence is not merely an individual act and isolated phenomenon but rather a systematic and always "political" (Segato, 2021: 107, authors transl.) tool to (re-)produce and stabilize heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist structures. The gendered and hierarchical order of modern society manifests in the distribution of unpaid care work, precarious employment, the regulation of sexuality, or normative binary gender concepts of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. It also manifests in enabling structures for sexualized violence, which unjustly distribute vulnerability, credibility and responsibility along gendered lines. Here, we endeavored to frame sexualized violence as a means of producing and maintaining supposedly 'natural' gender and sexuality norms, which stabilize capitalist power relations within the "cis-hetero patriarchy" (Beier, 2023; authors' transl.). Thus, as a conclusion, we argue that sexualized violence is an expression of heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism—a societal formation that is built upon regimes of exploitation, inequality and hierarchies that serve as social root for enacting and silencing sexualized violence.

As mentioned in the opening, we live in a time of multiple crises. Globally we are witnessing an upsurge of right-wing and authoritarian politics and discourses as a hegemonic response to these crises. As numerous contributions from gender studies have outlined (for many see: Hark & Villa, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Dietze & Roth, 2020a), they all share an "'obsession with gender' and sexuality" (Dietze & Roth, 2020b: 7). Right-wing discourses attack feminist politics, queer and trans people, in particular trans women, and reproductive rights. When talking about sexualized violence, they use it to for their nationalist and racist agenda: They apply the logic of Othering of sexualized violence and frame it as 'danger imported by migrant men and male refugees'. By doing so, they not only remain silent about the normality of sexualized violence

perpetrated by white non-migrant middle-class cis-heteronormative fathers, uncles or partners in a heteronormative-patriarchal capitalist society. Furthermore, right-wing politics reinforce each of the five dimensions we identified as key enabling structures for normalizing and silencing sexualized violence: Its cornerstones are capitalism's imagination that bodies are possessions, in which some bodies are deemed available for other's use, as right-wing politics are an intensification of capitalist logics. They rest on a division of bodies considered as having the right to use, and those bodies considered available to be used. Since right-wing politics are invested in 'rescuring' the patriarchal division of labor and the 'natural role' of motherhood, they reinforce the heteronormative-patriarchal assumption of women's availability for (male) others (Sauer, 2020). They also enforce the heteronormative-patriarchal distinction between the private and public sphere by promising what they consider as naturally given: a patriarchal private sphere and intimacy that defends patriarchal privileges (Leidinger & Radvan, 2018). At the same time, by accusing feminists or queer and trans activists of threatening the public with their 'unnatural' desires or demands, they strengthen the silencing structures of the public/private-divide. Furthermore, their attacks on gender politics and gender studies are driven by the desire of pushing back feminist achievements in bodily autonomy and freedom of choice. It comes as no surprise that all right-wing parties enforce a traditional, heteronormative understanding of femininity and aim to push back – in some cases even forbid – access to abortion (Dietze & Roth, 2020b). Right-wing politics also defend a model of society that is structured through authorities and hierarchies. By aiming to defend a hierarchical 'relationship between men and women' as 'natural' they also strengthen the normalization of the potentiality of violence. Finally, right-wing politics also attack feminist infrastructures such as autonomous refugees for battered women or organizations dedicated to feminist prevention work against sexualized violence by either cutting their funding or, in the extreme case, by banning them altogether. Thus, right-wing politics actively engage in (re-)building a social environment that intensifies what we have described as a division of labor with regard to sexualized violence: by making the social environment even less accessible for social awareness conducive to providing support for survivors of sexualized violence.

In summary, the hegemony of right-wing politics (will) lead(s) to an intensification of those social structures that we have identified as enabling structures for normalizing and silencing sexualized violence. However, before closing, it is crucial to stress that the contemporary right-wing authoritarianization of politics does not constitute a break with heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism. Rather, in the current authoritarian era, the social roots for enabling and silencing sexualized violence that already are the 'normality' of a heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism, can intensify. In response to challenges of multiple crises where right-wing politics offer simplistic answers and 'solutions' for so many people, we argue

that it is essential for materialist-feminist scholars to continue exposing the gendered and deeply violent subtext of both right-wing and mainstream liberal politics and point out the continuity between the violence of right-wing politics and liberal politics of 'normal' heteronormative-patriarchal capitalism. That being said, it is not enough to critique the extremes of right-wing rhetoric; we must also interrogate the everyday violence embedded in so-called 'normal' capitalist societies. In light of the multiple crises and the intensification of inequalities, hierarchies and violence that in particular happens if the multiple crises are met with right-wing political 'solutions', it is an imperative task for materialist-feminist scholars to keep reminding that our given social order is not unchangeable. It is a product of human actions which are malleable and ultimately changeable. Using the imperative to transform social structures in a way that the normalization of violence becomes irritated, would be an appropriate rationale for initiating these transformations.

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