

Shame and Humiliation

by Ute Frevert

This photo was taken by Ulrich Schreiterer in Delhi on 22 January 2014. He happened to be at Khan Market, an expensive shopping district in the modern center of the capital, as several Indians, most of them young, demonstrated. He knew my professional interest in shame and embarrassment so he took the photos and brought me a leaflet that explained the background of the protest.

What was the protest about? It was centred on the social phenomenon of acid attacks that mostly affect women. According to the leaflet at least one woman is disfigured and branded in South Asia every week as the result of jealousy or financial disputes – frequently it is a rejected suitor seeking to take revenge and punish the woman.[1] The "Stop Acid Attacks" (SAA) movement was formed in 2013 to combat this phenomenon by raising awareness through public actions and a strong media presence.[2] The movement uses the slogan "Spot of Shame". One such place of shaming was the Khan Market, the location in which the 16-year-old Laxmi was attacked with acid by someone she knew in 2013.

What does this have to do with shame and humiliation? On the one hand campaigners point out that shame is at work every time a spurned suitor resorts to a bottle of acid. A man feels shamed by a woman: her "No" is an affront to his self-respect and pride. He feels humiliated in front of his friends and relatives for whom he may even occasionally become an object of scorn and Schadenfreude. Rejection is interpreted as a defeat and makes him appear as a passive victim. Only through his act of revenge does he regain his own power to act, so he publically inflicts shame and disgrace upon the woman. The price she pays for her self-will is the irreversible disfigurement of her face, body, and soul, injuries all can see. The traces of humiliation are permanent. In this context, "Spot of Shame" refers to the place where the shaming of a woman has occurred, where "women have been injured with a shameful intent".

On the other hand the "Spot of Shame" also refers to a place of shame for those who watch the attack, fail to prevent it and must always live with this memory. The leaflet uses forthright language: "We need to be ashamed of letting a woman be intentionally hurt and for turning our heads away in indifference". The opposite would be to act, to direct rather than avert one's gaze. Finally, it would be to speak out and commit oneself to a society in which the "co-existence of both the genders is much more safe, dignified, and respectful". The real acid, the argument continues, is rooted in "our attitudes and culture" and shows itself only after the attack: "We forget, ignore, cut-off from these victims living with disfigured faces and mutilated bodies". People should feel ashamed of this, and that sense of shame should open up a new path: the path of empathy, support, and respect for the female victims.

The poster that the young woman in the photo carries before her gives the motto. It is a quote from the American psychiatrist and bioethicist Willard Gaylin that circulates around the Internet: "Shame and guilt are noble emotions essential in the maintenance of civilized society, and vital for the development of some of the most refined and elegant qualities of human potential." [3] To be ashamed of the social humiliation inflicted on women by acid attacks is, therefore, both a prerequisite and a consequence of civilization. The shameful behavior of certain men must become a source of public outcry and spur active solidarity with humiliated women. At the same time society ought to share the shame of its members who act with disregard to social norms and fail to comprehend why their actions are shameful. Looking away too must become a reason for shame. This double shame is a proof of moral dignity and maturity. Those who cannot or will not be ashamed run the risk of collapsing into barbarism.

A striking feature of this argument is the ambivalent interpretation of shame and humiliation. On the one hand, true shame in terms of wanton, targeted humiliation and degradation of other people is considered a breach of social decorum and individual dignity. The public humiliation of the victim returns to the offender and the society that covers for him. On the other hand, shame is characterized as a "noble sentiment" that grows in proportion to the degree of individual and social culture. According to Gaylin and his young Indian followers those who are capable of feeling shame (for themselves and for others) belong in a "civilized society". This recalls the theses of the sociologist Norbert Elias. In his reflections on the process of civilization published in the 1930s, he claimed that an ever increasing wave of shame and embarrassment could be observed in modern European history. The ability and willingness to feel ashamed about anything or anyone had intensified significantly, a claim which Elias associated with a denser socioeconomic "interdependence" and the establishment of the state monopoly on violence. As a consequence of this monopoly, accompanied by the disarmament of social actors, people had learned to adhere to rules and



© Uli Schreiterer

feel ashamed when they deviated from these rules or lost control over themselves and their bodies. In this perspective shame can be interpreted as a corrective tool for social misbehavior. Those who do not feel offended by such misdemeanors, perpetrated by themselves or others, are perceived as shameless and threaten society's normative cohesion and social integration.[4]

Elias' thoughts put the (as yet unwritten) story of shame and humiliation on interesting tracks and illuminate the significance of the Indian example.

1. The protest of the young activists at Khan Market (probably for the most part members of Delhi's educated middle class and quite familiar with global discourse culture) is part of a moral economy concerning universal human rights that calls for respect for human dignity, including protection against humiliation. This applies not only to the victims of acid attacks, whose only offense has been to defy the expectations of others. It also applies to actual offenders, whose punishment includes public humiliation, as is often the case in the US or China. The question as to whether such shame sanctions are appropriate often stirs controversy in the US.[5] In Europe, shaming punishments were quite common in medieval and early modern history. In the legal systems of many countries the pillory was often used as a punishment. Offenders who had committed serious violations of law and order remained in a humiliating posture for hours or days, preferably at highly frequented locations, defenseless against the prying eyes and mocking comments of passers-by. It was not until the nineteenth century that modern criminal law became detached from the public: executions ceased to be carried out in the open and the pillory lost its function. The fact that offenders were spared the scorn of gaping onlookers was partly justified by respect for human dignity: Even convicted criminals should not be denied their dignity, which was supposed to be better preserved behind prison bars (regardless of the fact that prisons remain a haven of individual and collective humiliation until today).
2. Those who used human dignity as an argument equated shame with indignity and humiliation. Against the backdrop of modern individualism, which defended the individual against ascriptions and social impositions, shame fell into disrepute. It was regarded as an infringement of the autonomy of a person that functioned by branding their nonconformity as problematic and exposing them to public contempt. The pillory was particularly frowned upon as it was enforced from a position of strength. What might be tolerated from weaker members of society under certain circumstances – classic Charivaris, the "rough music" that humiliated unpopular dignitaries, for example – was condemned as a domination strategy when used by the powerful.
3. This, however, does not mean that shame became obsolete. In Nazi Germany interfaith (Jewish with non-Jewish) couples were dragged through the streets with signs around their necks mocking and branding them as 'race defilers'.[6] In Austria in 1938 Jewish citizens were forced to scrub anti-Nazi slogans off the streets and sidewalks with their bare hands or with toothbrushes. After the war public rage in France, Italy, Poland and many other countries was directed against women who had had love affairs with occupying German soldiers, forcibly shaving the heads of these women in public.[7] Such shaming practices were not carried out by the state or its organs but by social groups that valued "public morality" and degraded coram publico anyone who was thought to have violated this morality. The state with its official monopoly on violence turned a blind eye or even encouraged this kind of civil action.
4. Social and institutional shaming practices attracted increasing criticism under the banner of the radical democratization and liberalization processes that Western European societies underwent in the second half of the twentieth century. This was evident especially in education. In school physical punishment and public humiliation, both highly controversial already in the nineteenth century, were less and less inflicted. Being forced to sit in the dunce's seat (the bench of disgrace) or to stand in a corner with the back to the class are unpleasant memories from my school days in the 1960s. In non-democratic countries such exclusion practices are still popular, as a BBC documentary on China recently revealed: the documentary showed for instance how a pupil who had been careless with his eraser was confronted by the teacher in front of the class. For a whole day he was forced to wear a torn sweater as a reminder to everyone that he was a wrongdoer. When finally he was allowed to take off the shaming garment, he was considered purified and could return to the classroom community.[8]
5. The fact that such policies of public humiliation for the purpose of social reintegration are no longer accepted in liberal-democratic societies (even school sports days are now condemned as a humiliation ritual for weaker students unsuited to the modern world[9]) demonstrates how sensitivity concerning what is perceived as an attack on human dignity has increased in recent years and decades. Whenever such attacks are carried out by powerful institutions (school, social welfare, the penal system, employers, etc.) they encounter public opposition and protest. It is difficult, however, to deal with public humiliation that originates from the core of society. Young people, in particular, feel under pressure to conform, which takes almost monstrous proportions when it comes to the Internet and social media. The more important the peer group becomes as a socialization factor, the more power it exerts over teenagers. Those who knowingly or unknowingly violate the unwritten rules of the group must reckon with harsh repercussions with a wide-ranging impact that humiliate the shamed person and dismantle whatever is left of their personality. People who were forced to stand in the

pillory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had to endure being spat on by the audience and pelted with excrement. Nowadays the filth used to shame others has become verbal and visual without losing any of its disgusting quality.

6. New and old kinds of humiliating filth have an additional thing in common: Both stick to the body in literal and figurative sense. Especially the female body has been the target of various shaming practices since the nineteenth century. At a time when sexuality was as repressed as it was obsessively in focus, young girls were raised to be ashamed of and through their bodies, to cover them up and to conceal them from the male gaze. For women modesty was a *conditio sine qua non*; those who sold or gave away their bodies were branded as shameless. The patriarchal logic of this doctrine had been disavowed by the first women's movement, but it was not until the feminism of the 1970s that it was dethroned, at least temporarily. There are indications that this attitude, in a different guise, is re-gaining dominance. Anyone in doubt should only watch TV shows like "Germany's Next Top Model", popular among young girls, with an abundance of body-related humiliations.

The acid attacks that Indian women like Laxmi have to anticipate if they do not submit to male expectations are also related to the body. By means of public shaming and injury, "shameless" obstinate women are punished and humiliated for alleged norm violations. The protest of young activists rejects this attitude as shameless, suggesting instead a different perception of individual dignity and women's rights. The protesters' view, which is in line with India's constitutional principles, requires broad social acceptance and a clear and meaningful stance. Obviously their goal is not to turn the tables and publicly shame the perpetrators. Such stigma-inducing, lynching mob practices are contrary to the liberal values of the protesters. Instead, protesters appeal to society's "noble" feelings of shame in the name of many individual citizens who feel that their honor has been injured through such attacks. However, this presupposes that Indian society shares the activists' views on women's rights and condemns their disregard. For the young demonstrators at Delhi's Khan Market this would be a sign of civility, quite in the sense of Elias' definition of the "process of civilization" as increasing self-control and internalized shame as a consequence of norm violations.

Further Reading

- Christoph Demmerling and Hilge Landweer, *Philosophie der Gefühle: Von Achtung bis Zorn* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2007).
- Ute Frevert, *Vergängliche Gefühle* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).
- Ute Frevert, "Piggy's Shame," in *Learning How to Feel: Children's Literature and Emotional Socialization, 1870-19170*, Ute Frevert et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 134–54.
- Thomas J. Scheff and Suzanne M. Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1991).
- Léon Wurmser, *The Mask of Shame* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

[1] Conflicts over property and dowries (as well as rejected marriage proposals) were behind the majority of acid attacks on women documented in 2014. See: <http://www.acidsurvivors.org/Statistics/2> (last accessed on 8 August 2015). Cf. Mridula Bandyopadhyay and Mahmuda Rahman Khan, "Loss of Face: Violence Against Women in South Asia," in *Violence Against Women in Asian Societies: Gender Inequality and Technologies of Violence*, Lenore Manderson and Linda Rae Bennett (eds) (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 61-73.

[2] See the website <http://www.stopacidattacks.org>.

[3] <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/1029004> (last accessed on 8 August 2015).

[4] Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976).

[5] Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For a counterargument see Amitai Etzioni, "Back to the Pillory?" *The American Scholar* 68, no. 3 (1999): 43-50.

[6] Cf. Alexandra Przyrembel, *"Rassenschande": Reinheitsmythos und Vernichtungslegitimation im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

[7] Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (Oxford: Berg, 2002). Ian Johnson has discussed similar punishment practices during the Cultural Revolution in China in Johnson, 'China's Brave New Underground Journal', *New York Review of Books*, 18 December 2014.

[8] On strategies of "reintegrative shaming" in contrast to shaming as a form of the stigmatisation of persons see John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[9] <https://www.change.org/p/petition-bundesjugendspiele-abschaffen-manuelaschwesig> (last accessed on 11 August 2015).

Citation

Ute Frevert. "Shame and Humiliation", in *History of Emotions - Insights into Research*, October 2015, DOI: 10.14280/08241.47

Ute Frevert. "Shame and Humiliation", in *History of Emotions - Insights into Research*, October 2015, DOI: