From "violence against women" to "violence against women and girls". The reconceptualisation of violence against women in United-Nations discourse

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The reconceptualisation of violence against women in United-Nations discourse

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to discuss the reconceptualisation of violence against women in the United-Nations discourse on violence against women between 1996 and 2019. The paper relies on a corpus-based approach to discourse analysis and argues that the term "violence against women and girls" became the United-Nations' preferred term to discuss the issue of violence against women in their press releases because of a shift in the feminist theorisation of the concept of "violence against women" and the influence of the geopolitical context of the 2000's and beginning of the 2010's.

Keywords: discourse analysis, international, United-Nations, violence against women, corpus analysis, textometry, diachrony

Introduction

Nowadays, violence against women is recognised as a social problem that requires the intervention of states as well as international organisations. Yet, it has not always been the case: violence against women used to be considered as a private matter, and it is only in the 1970's that the public spotlight was turned on this issue thanks to feminist movements (Delage, 2017: 6-7). Official international institutions like the United-Nations or the World Health Organisation began to consider violence against women as a violation of human rights in the 1990's. The concept of violence against women was defined for the first time by the United-Nations in 1993, when violence against women was declared an area of concern for the organisation. In 1995, on the occasion of the Beijing Conference on Women, a milestone in the history of violence against women, the first plan of action to deal with this issue around the world was set by the organisation. Since then, the organisation has published a plethora of texts on this specific issue. In these texts, the aim of the United-Nations is to draw the attention of national and international actors on the issue of violence against women, to provide reliable information on this issue, and to propose concrete solutions to combat it.

This research project aims to determine how United-Nations discourse on violence against women has changed since the Beijing Conference, and to understand what these changes mean. The United-Nations is chosen because of the status, power and legitimacy of this international organ and because of the crucial role it has played both in the definition and in the fight against violence against women.

In this paper, we will first define corpora and discuss their use in discourse analysis, before describing the diachronic corpus designed for the present study and the method used to analyse it. In the following section, the results extracted from the corpus will be presented. Finally, the obtained results will be discussed and related to the history of feminist movements that theorised violence against women and to the history of the organisation.

Corpus-based approaches to discourse analysis

Nowadays, a great amount of research in discourse studies relies on corpora. Coming from a Latin word meaning "body", a corpus can be defined as a large body of language "designed for a particular research project" (Baker, 2006: 147). Corpus linguistics techniques were developed in the 1990's at the University of Birmingham, when they served to assist the building of grammars and dictionaries. The development of computerised corpora has made it possible to analyse a large amount of linguistic data, and to offer analysts the high degree of objectivity they were looking for (Stubbs, 1994: 202-218; Hardt Mautner, 1995: 3; Baker et al, 2008: 277) and the possibility to reveal phenomena otherwise undetectable (Sinclair, 1991: 100; Partington et al., 2013: 11). Thanks to Partington's research in the 2000's, the school of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies was founded at the University of Bologna, and many discourse analysts made use of corpora to better understand discourse, especially those interested in political discourse, because of the importance of language in politics (Partington, 2013: 1-2).

Over the past few years, several discourse analysis research projects on violence against women made use of computerised corpora, for instance Sanchez's works on online forum posts on intime-partner violence or Busso et al.'s study of the representation of gender-based violence in an Italian media corpus (Sanchez, 2017, 2018; Busso et al., 2020).

Corpora can be explored using different softwares. In France, it is as early as in the 1970's that André Salem, Pierre Lafon, Maurice Tournier, and Serge Heiden began to develop tools designed to analyse large amounts of linguistic data from a diachronic perspective, which resulted in the creation of Lexico 3 and Lexico 5. These tools make it possible to observe the evolution of the lexis used in a corpus overtime using stastistic methods (Leblanc, 2017: 33-35). This approach called lexicometry was later declined as textometry, with the development of advanced corpus exploration tools like TXM (Heiden et al., 2010), which is used in this study.

Corpus and method

A 611 718-word corpus was built to conduct the present study. It is made up of 253 press releases dealing with the theme of violence against women. They were published between 1996 and 2019 and collected from the United-Nations and UN Women's official websites using the advanced research option of the United-

Nations website and a script written specifically to extract them from the websites. Text selection was realised in two steps. First, texts were selected whenever their titles contained both the words "violence" and "women". This was followed by a second step to make sure that texts dealing with violence against women which did not contain both the words "violence" and "women" in their titles were not left out. In order to collect such texts, a term tree of violence against women was built using United-Nations terminological resources. This term tree is presented in Figure 1. The sources used to build this tree are listed in Appendix 1. All the terms that appear on this term tree were used as keywords to look for additional texts to add to the corpus on the United-Nations and UN Women's official websites. Despite the unicity of their source, the collected texts are not uniform in structure and length: press releases thus vary from 200 to 14 800 words, with a mean of 2500 words per text. The corpus is organised in such a way that texts can be separated according to their year of publication.
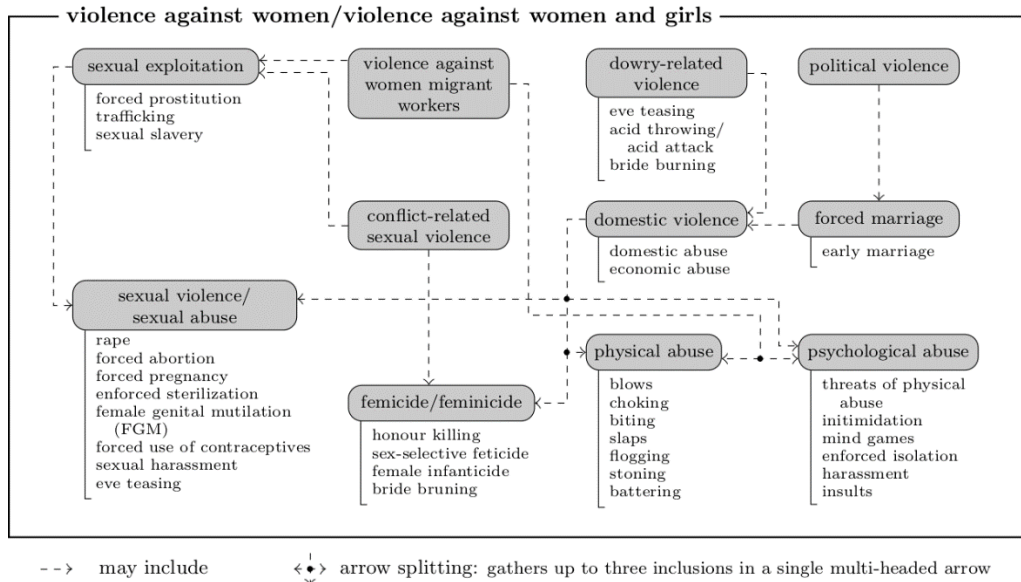

Figure 1: Term tree of violence against women

This corpus was analysed using TXM, an open source textual corpus analysis software (Heiden et al., 2010). TXM has different functions: a concordancer, several tools for performing statistical analyses, and a tool for multidimensional analysis called Correspondance Analysis (CA). CA is a method that enables one to produce a graphical representation of a dataset that highlights the oppositions and correlations in the data. In our case, the dataset is made up of all the words in our corpus and their distribution across the different parts of our corpus. To conduct this study, our corpus was divided into 24 parts, according to the year of publication of the texts, ranging from 1996 to 2019.

The apparent imbalance between the different parts of the corpus due to the United-Nations' and UN Women's not publishing the same number of texts every year is corrected by the TXM's statistical computations in such a way that they do not impact the results.

The correspondence analysis carried out on our corpus yielded a scatter plot on which two kinds of points are represented: on one hand, the words and, on the other hand the parts of our corpus. A list of words which appeared to be more specific to some parts of our corpus than the others was inferred from the positions of the points on the plot. This is how we were able to determine that some words were very frequently used at a certain period of time in our texts.

Then, the immediate contexts of these words were observed using TXM's concordancer tool. Eventually, influential historical texts outside the corpus were used to contextualise our observations and see how the changes observed in the conceptualisation of violence against women have historical foundations.

Results

The correspondence analysis results suggest that the first 14 parts of our corpus, which are made up of texts published between 1996 and 2009, are very different from the other 10 parts, which correspond to the texts published between 2010 and 2019 in terms of the lexis that is used in these parts. This is illustrated in Figure 2, where the points corresponding to the 1996 to 2009 parts of our corpus are very far from the cluster of points that represents the 2010 to 2019 parts.
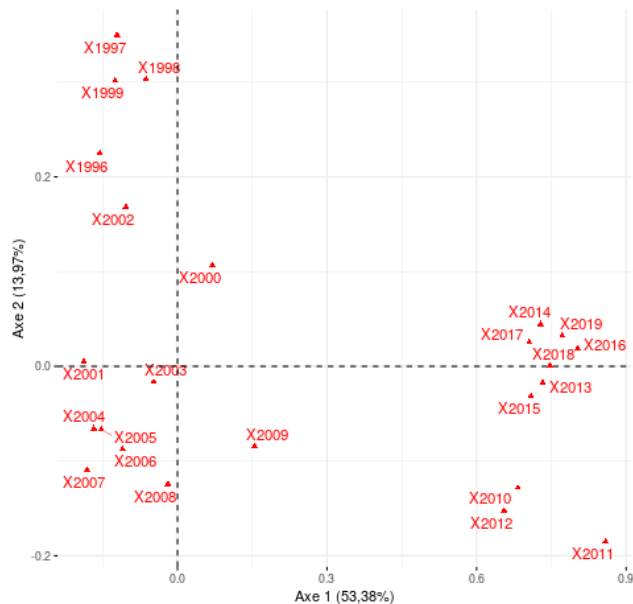
Figure 2: Graphical representation of the correspondence analysis

What is more, the correspondence analysis revealed that some words were more specific to the texts published between 2010 and 2019 than to the texts published before 2010. Although around twenty words were identified, only two of these words will be discussed in this paper: "against" and "girls". These two words were chosen because observing their contexts led to the same observation: in the

2010's, a new term seems to appear to designate violence against women, possibly because violence against women was reconceptualised. These words, along with their frequencies and specificity scores are presented in Table 1 below. The specificity score is an indicator of how specific a word is in the part of the corpus for which the score is computed: a positive value is associated with a high degree of specificity, while a negative value indicates a lower degree, that is, that the word is not used as frequently as in other parts of the corpus.

Word	Raw frequency 1996-2009	Raw frequency 2010-2019	Specificity score 1996-2009	Specificity score 2010-2019
against	2506	779	[-33,1 ; 10,3]	[0,7 ; 20,0]
girls	720	660	[-11,7 ; -0,3]	[0,9 ; 48,8]

Table 1: Frequencies and specificity scores of the words "against" and "girls"

The specificity scores computed for "against" and "girls" show that they are used more frequently in texts published between 2010 and 2019. Besides, the observation of the immediate contexts of these words highlights the fact that they are used in various kinds of contexts before 2010 whereas they are used to form the term "violence against women and girls" in most contexts after 2010. A selection of these contexts is presented in the concordance extracts for "against" and "girls" in Tables 2 and 3.

Date of publication	Context
1996-01-26	on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination **against** Women.
1998-03-02	the problem of violence **against** women migrant workers
2000-06-05	uncompromising war on physical violence **against** women and the invasion of their bodies
2002-11-11	elimination of all forms of violence **against** women
2006-05-18	to pass laws to eradicate violence **against** women since 1998
2009-02-23	Europe concluded a two-year campaign to stop violence **against** women.
2010-11-18	The word is spreading: violence **against** women and girls has no place in any society
2013-05-23	part of the UN-Women COMMIT to end violence **against** women and girls initiative.
2016-11-21	there is global recognition that violence **against** women and girls is a human rights violation
2019-11-25	Violence **against** women and girls is a global pandemic.

Table 2: Concordance extract for "against"

Date of publication	Context
1997-01-21	It was known that **girls** mature more rapidly than boys

1998-01-08	cultural accessible service for all migrant women and **girls** who were victims of gender-based violence
1999-03-08	to create a world that is safe for women and **girls**
2000-03-06	In such countries, the **girls** suffered the double burden of having been raped and then bringing unwanted babies into the world.
2002-10-11	Those acts aimed at protecting women and **girls** form [sic] bias, prejudice and all forms of violence or discrimination.
2003-10-15	laws and regulations designed to protect the rights of women and **girls** and to punish perpetrators of violence against women and **girls**.
2007-03-09	it would call on States to develop standards for data collection on violence against **girls**
2010-11-18	to take responsibility for eradicating violence against women and **girls**.
2011-11-23	We want people everywhere to speak up; to say "No" to violence against women and **girls**.
2013-03-05	some 99 countries have national statistics showing the prevalence of violence against women and **girls**.
2016-12-08	prevention and elimination of violence against women and **girls**
2017-02-14	an advocate to end violence against women and **girls**
2019-06-26	investment in eradicating violence against women and **girls** worldwide
2019-09-26	exposed the magnitude of violence against women and **girls** and how often it is normalized
2019-09-26	law enforcement in ending violence against women and **girls** in private and public spaces

Table 3: Concordance extract for "girls"

The progression tool provided by TXM makes it possible to confirm that there is a significant progression in the use of the sequence of words "violence against women and girls" in the corpus. This progression is represented in Figure 3 below. The corpus being chronologically ordered, this graphical representation illustrates how "violence against women and girls" became a popular term in the second half of the time period under study.
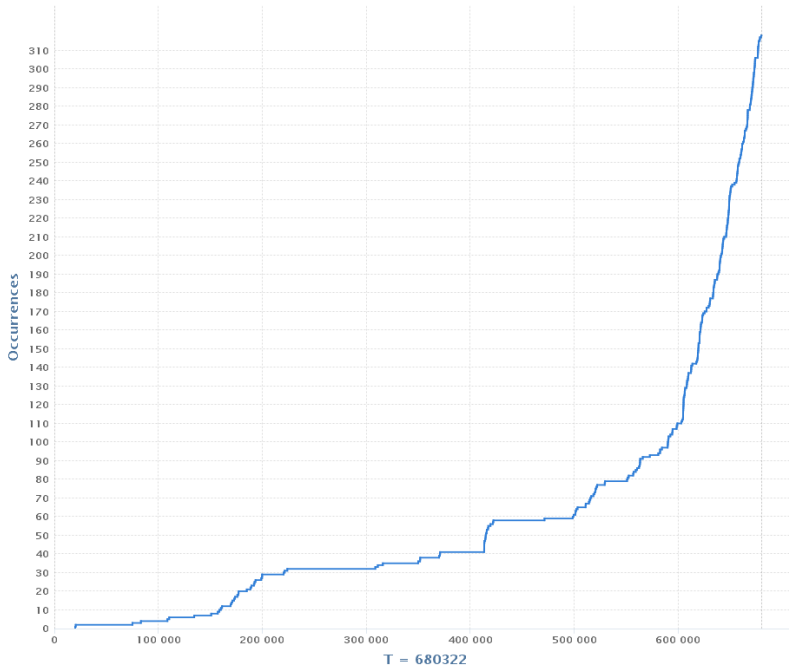
Figure 3: Progression chart of the sequence "violence against women and girls"

When a new term appears, various concurrent expressions that express similar concepts can be found in corpora (Dury & Drouin, 2009 : 36). We did find such expressions in our corpus. They are listed in Table 3.

Expression	frequency
violence against women and girls	*318*
violence against girls	16
girls who experience violence	5
violence and discrimination against women and girls	4
violence against women and trafficking in women and girls	3
girls experiencing abuse in their lifetime, violence	2
girls subjected to violence	2
girls were persistently subjected to all kinds of violence	2
girls who had survived violence	2
violence, of which the principal victims were women and girls	2
violence and sexual abuse against girls	1

Table 4: Concurrent expressions to "violence against women and girls"
and their frequencies

Figure 4 represents the progression of the sequence of words "violence against women and girls" in red and the progress of the concurrent expressions that designate the same concept in our corpus in blue. This confirms that the term

"violence against women and girls" became the preferred way of expressing the idea that girls also experience forms of violence similar to those experienced by women because they are girls at the end of the time period under study.
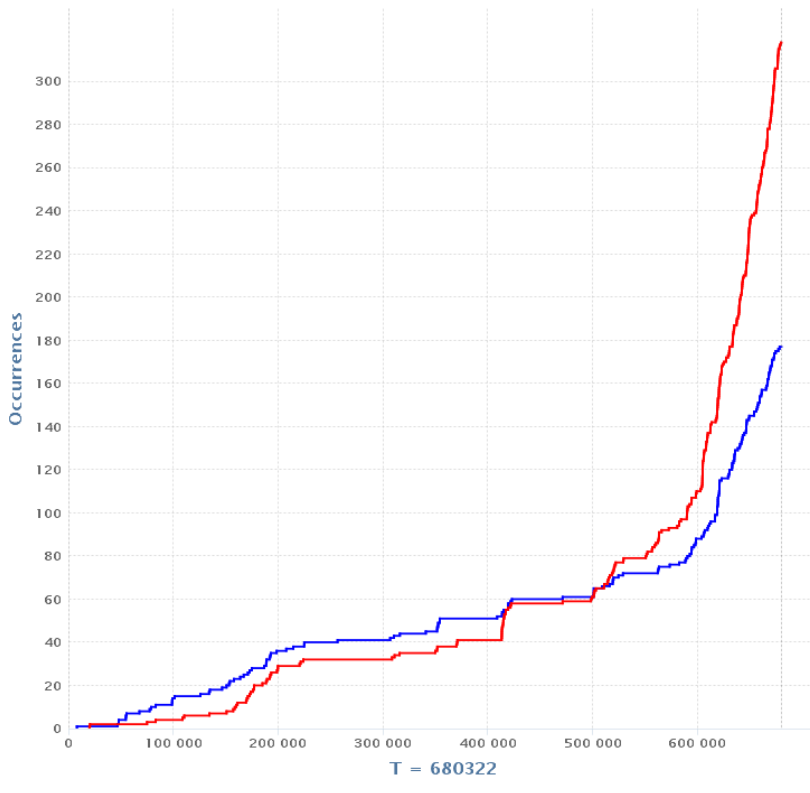

Figure 4: Progression chart of concurrent expressions to
"violence against women and girls"

Discussion

The results presented in the previous section suggest that the term "violence against women and girls" emerged in 2010 and that it has been increasingly preferred over "violence against women" since then. In this section, the hypothesis that the term "violence against women" was progressively replaced by "violence against women and girls" is presented as the consequence of a reconceptualisation of violence against women around 2010.

Reconceptualisation is intended here as a change in a concept due to a change in its theorisation (Valette, 2003: 2). In the case of violence against women, such changes mainly arise as the consequences of evolutions in feminist theories, and reflect the propagation of these ideas on the sociopolitical stage through key actors such as the United-Nations. Hence, it is likely that linguistic evidence of reconceptualisation will occur in United-Nations discourse, since the

organisation relies on the publication of texts such as press releases to express and defend their positions on violence against women.

Further evidence of the reconceptualisation of this concept is likely to be found in United-Nations official statements published at the time when corresponding linguistic evidence is observable in the corpus under study. The hypothesis introduced above may thus be validated by a study of various texts from the United-Nations other than press releases if explicit statements of the assumed reconceptualisation are found. More precisely, our corpus-based observations suggest that the replacement of "violence against women" by "violence against women and girls" started around 2010, meaning that the hypothetic reconceptualisation occurred during the 2009-2010 period: the correlation between the linguistic observations made here and explicit references to the situation of girls around the world at this time may support our hypothesis.

Amid all the texts published by the United-Nations, some are considered more important than others. These historical, influential texts are called architexts (Maingueneau in Rist, 2002: 123). Such texts are recognised as being above other less important and less influential texts in terms of hierarchy. In this respect, any United-Nations text has to conform to these architexts. This is why any suspected reconceptualisation of a concept in United-Nations texts should be retrievable in architexts that deal with this issue. A selection of architexts on violence against women were consulted in order to see whether there was any significant change in the way the concept of violence against women was defined. Were the hypothesis defended in this paper to be valid, architexts would yet not enable us to understand what actually led the United-Nations to change their conception of violence against women. Where would the reconceptualisation of violence against women at the United-Nations come from? Answers to this question arise from the study of the socio-historical context of the publication of United-Nations texts conducted in this section.

In the second half of the 1970's, feminist theory focused on violence against women in the form of "woman or wife battering" in the USA, in Europe and in Latino-American countries (Delage, 2017: 34; Machado, 2019: 1). At this point, violence against women was theorised as one of the symptoms of women's oppression in the private sphere, and more specifically in the context of marriage. Sexual violence and physical violence were foregrounded as major issues and feminists proposed specific measures to help victims of conjugal violence, mainly state intervention and legal action (see MacKinnon, 1989). They also defended the idea that intimate partner violence was due to unequal power relations between men and women (Delage, 2017: 7) and that the private was political, which meant that states had to intervene to fight violence against women. This movement successfully influenced state policies, especially in North America. For example, in 1984, in the USA, the Attorney General created the Department of Justice Task Force on Family Violence to improve response to domestic violence. In the 1990's, Diana Russell, an American feminist, theorised and popularized the concept of "femicide", and feminists across the world began to use this term to denounce the impunity enjoyed by men who killed their wives or exes (Russell & Radford, 1992).

The UN is known to draw on the feminist theories of its choice (Raus, 2013: 101). In the 1995 *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, violence against women is defined as

> Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. [...]
> (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
> (b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution;
> (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs. (UN, 1995: 48-49)

This definition suggests that forms of violence against women taking place outside of the conjugal sphere fell into the category of acts of violence against women. Such a definition, as exhaustive as it was intended, is not enough to fully understand how violence against women was conceptualised by the United-Nations. The remarkable discrepancy between this definition and the role the United-Nations said they would play in the fight against violence against women also contributes to the conceptualisation of violence against women. The way they discussed the issue and how they intended to solve it illustrates what they considered as the most important aspects of the concept of violence against women at this point - namely domestic violence in the form of wife battering and/or marital rape – at the expense of other aspects such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage or sexual violence in conflict, to name but a few. In the same document, the organisation listed the actions it intended to take in this fight. What is particularly striking is that all the listed actions were centered on domestic violence, and none of them were related to forms of violence against women that occurred outside the domestic sphere or before marriage (UN, 1995: 51-55). This focus on domestic violence is reminiscent of the feminist theories of the 1970's and 1980's, in which there is a stronger focus on forms of violence confined to the conjugal sphere, in the home, which is seen as the place where the unequal power relations between men and women are actualised in the form of violent acts. It is likely that such a similarity is not a mere coincidence since conceptualisation and theorisation go together (Valette, 2003: 2). Yet the United-Nations do not take part in the theorisation of the concept, they merely choose from the theories that they consider valid, appropriate, and relevant to define a concept and decide what actions will be taken. This is why it is not surprising that the conceptualisation of violence against women in 1995 should be inherited from certain feminist theories of violence against women.

This strong focus on domestic violence has had consequences: it has overshadowed the problem of violence against girls in the 1990's and 2000's. In 1989, the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC), a UN architext, was ratified.

This text condemned all the kinds of violence children could be subjected to, including the specific forms of violence affecting the girl child. Although the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action contains a section on the girl child which mentions the CRC, the organisation simply delegated actions to be taken to fight violence against girls to governments. While the organisation listed a number of actions it would take against domestic violence in this document, it did not announce any action to take to end violence against girls.

In the 2000's, new transnational contributions to feminism emerged. Antiracist feminists drew on bell hook's criticism of the 1970's and 1980's feminist movements, which said feminists needed to "think bigger and better in their struggle against male violence" and shed light on the underlying problems of the 1970's and 1980's movements (Hooks, 1984: 130-131 in Hall, 2015: 2). In this respect, four noticeable contributions are those of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Andrea Smith, Patricia Hill Collins, and Elizabeth Philipose. In 2003, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, an Indian-american feminist scholar, contributed to the theorisation of transnational feminism. She published works in which she criticized Eurocentrist and racist feminism as well as American imperialism, focused on the forms of violence and discrimination Third World women were subjected to and advocated for anti-colonial feminism (Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty et al., 2003). In 2005, Andrea Smith argued that calling for greater state action against domestic violence obscured the state violence perpetrated against indigenous women in the Americas (Smith, 2005 in Hall, 2015: 4). She linked violence against women and girls with processes of appropriation and degradation, and theorised sexual violence as a state tool of racism and colonialism (Smith, 2005: 8) [1]. In 2006, Patricia Hill Collins, discussing the violence experienced by trafficked Nigerian girls and women, said one could not address this form of violence without putting global exploitative structures at the centre of one's conception of violence against women (Collins, 2006). In 2008, Elizabeth Philipose, focusing on international law and colonialism, said imperial powers had been using violence against women and girls to justify racist policies in their countries, intervention and occupation in some countries outside their borders, to protect women and girls from "violent, backwards cultures" (Philipose, 2008: 112 in Hall, 2015: 14).

Such conceptualisations of violence against women are likely to have influenced the United-Nations. The 2000's feminist movement stressed the fact that states could not be the only actors to fight against violence against women because they could implement racist policies in doing so, and may subject some populations to violence in situations of conflict. These feminists also made manifest the link between the often violent occupation of land in the global South by Western countries in situations of conflict and violence against women and girls. It is also in the 2000's, and more specifically from 2005 on that the organisation expressed particular concern about violence against girls in situations of conflict. In 2005, that is, ten years after the Beijing Conference, a World Summit was held by the organisation. In the published *Outcome* of this summit, there is a noticeable focus on violence against the girl-child, and on the need to protect civilians, in particular women and girls during and after armed conflicts (UN, 2005: 17, 26-27). Two years later, in 2007, resolutions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child and

the violation of the rights of the girl child were adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women, at its fifty-first session, based on the commitments expressed in the *Outcome of the 2005 World Summit* (UN, 2007). In the report of this session, the Commission requested that the Secretary General of the United-Nations should ensure that all relevant organs of the United-Nations system

> "take into account the protection and promotion of the rights of girls against female genital mutilation in their country programmes, as appropriate, and in accordance with national priorities, in order to further strengthen their efforts in this regard" (UN, 2007: 28).

Unlike in 1995, the Secretary General and several United-Nations organs were requested to take action in the protection of the rights of girls, and did not leave everything in the hands of states. In addition to that, in 2008, the Security Council of the United-Nations adopted a resolution (resolution 1820) on women, peace and security, focusing specifically on preventing and ending sexual violence in situations of conflict. In 2010, UNICEF published a report arguing that the situation of young girls around the world remained preoccupying due to - inter alia – child marriage (UNICEF, 2010: 4-5, 46). One year later, the United-Nations launched the initiative "Girls not Brides" which they introduced as a new global effort to end child marriage, thus turning the international spotlight on this specific form of violence that affects girls. The same year, on December 19th, the United-Nations decided to declare October 11th the International Day of the Girl Child, to recognise the rights of girls and the unique challenges faced by girls around the world.

Therefore, the United-Nations' interest in the issue of violence against girls was rekindled around 2010, possibly because of the influence of transnational feminists, along with that of the global geopolitical context of the time. Indeed, between 2007 and 2011, the United-Nations and several member states were involved in conflicts, namely in Sudan, Congo, Palestine, and Ivory Coast. Various forms of violence against women and girls were observed during these conflicts such as sexual violence, rape, and forced marriage of girls. These conflicts took place after the 51st session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2007, hence they were the opportunity for the organisation to take concrete action for protecting girls from violence in conflict, as promised in 2007. In this respect, Denis Mukwege, a Congolese gynecologist and human rights activist who had treated thousands of victims of conflict-related sexual violence since the Second Congo War (1998-2003), was awarded the United-Nations Human Rights Prize in 2008. Moreover, in 2010, the Secretary General of the United-Nations reported

> "[a] noteworthy trend since 2005 [namely] the enactment of legislation regarding harmful practices, including female genital mutilation/cutting, early and forced marriage and so-called 'honour' crimes, in Africa and Europe." (UN, 2010: 79).

For example, in 2007, the Special Court for Sierra Leone prosecuted forced marriage as a crime against humanity for the first time in history. Yet, in the same document, the Secretary General stressed the fact that there were still many gaps and challenges to address to protect girls from violence around the world, acknowledging that

"the girl child does not yet receive sufficiently explicit attention in policy and programme development and resource allocation." (UN, 2010: 82).

Nevertheless, following the tendency to enact legislation on forced marriage identified by the Secretary General and influenced by United-Nations conventions on violence against women and the rights of the child, the Council of Europe wrote the *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, also known as the Istanbul Convention, which was opened for signature in 2011 and addressed the issue of forced marriage, *inter alia* (Council of Europe, 2011: 10).

All these elements seem to point to a greater effort on the organisation's part to address the issue of violence against girls conjointly with that of violence against women at the beginning of the 2010's. The increased focus on the issue of violence against girls in United-Nations commissions, as well as the concrete actions taken to address this issue in United-Nations peacekeeping missions in this period stand in stark contrast with the conceptualisation of violence against women by the organisation in the 1990's, which focused on domestic violence.

The shift observed between the feminist movements of the 1970's and 1980's and the transnational feminism of the 2000's in their conceptualisation of violence against women and how it should be addressed mirrors the United-Nations' new take on the issue, that consists of paying particular attention to violence against girls, especially in situations of conflict. These observations suggest that violence against women was indeed reconceptualised at the United-Nations, resulting in a preference for the term "violence against women and girls" rather than "violence against women" in United-Nations discourse.

Conclusion

A corpus-based analysis of United-Nations press releases dealing with the issue of violence against women and published between 1996 and 2019 revealed that a new term, "violence against women and girls" emerged in United-Nations discourse and that it became the preferred term used to discuss this issue from 2010 on. This can be seen as the sign of a reconceptualisation of the notion of violence against women at the United-Nations. This reconceptualisation was founded on the idea that many girls around the world were subjected to specific forms of violence, especially in situations of conflict, and that global intervention, rather than state intervention, was needed to tackle this issue, especially with new conflicts taking place around the world. Hence, the contrast between United-Nations texts from the 1990's and those published in the following decades can be correlated with a renewed interest in transnational feminism and new contributions to transnational feminist theory in the 2000's and a geopolitical context that favours violence against women and girls.

Notes

[1] It should be noted that in 2008, Andrea Smith was exposed for faking her Cherokee ancestry in her works. Despite the obvious ethical issue posed by this controversy, Smith's

works remained influential enough in the period under study to justify their mention in these pages.

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Appendix

List of sources used to build the violence against women term tree:

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