

Self-help groups with women victims of intimate partner violence

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Abstract

The “social” importance of the debate concerning the phenomenon of intimate partner violence and the possible forms of intervention feasible in its regard is now well established within various scientific disciplines, including the psychological one. The specific contribution that psychology can give, as well as the understanding of the phenomenon, is specifically linked to the area of intervention, both at the individual and group level.

In this regard, an interesting methodology, still relatively little explored in its implications in relation to situations of violence in an intimate relationship, is that of self-help.

The self-help groups, putting the people living certain difficult existential situations as protagonists, allow the assumption of an active role with respect to the proper condition of discomfort. The assumption of this active role is the precondition of any process of empowerment.

The present contribution, reporting an experience developed in an anti-violence service centre in the city of Rome, aims to discuss some aspects specific to self-help groups with women victims of intimate partner violence. It will also aim to promote a reflection about critical issues, resources and transformative possibilities inherent to this specific type of groups.

Key words: intimate partner violence, self-help, groups

The phenomenon of violence against women is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which takes on various shapes and connotations. This endemic phenomenon concerns all European countries and is present in all categories and social classes.

Talking about violence against women, as early as 1993 the United Nations defined it as *<<any act of gender-based violence that results in or may result in women damage or physical, psychological or sexual suffering, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, that occur throughout public or private life>>*, also stressing how *<<violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women>>* (UN, 1993).

It is starting from the consideration of this power relationship between genders that the choice of adopting a *gender-oriented* perspective in the analysis and in the fight against violence against women was made.

Adopting a gender-based perspective means taking on the gender as a priority category of analysis that allows to decode, in the different socio-cultural contexts and historical periods, power differences related to gender both in the public and in the private sphere, highlighting differences in living conditions between men and women.

Despite these power relations between men and women change, they are declined differently in the different contexts (historical and socio-cultural), their analysis are still essential for the understanding of the phenomenon of violence against women, as well as other social phenomena, and for the intervention on the same.

The assumption of gender as a discriminant category of analysis is referred to as *gender mainstreaming*.

The principle of gender mainstreaming, first mentioned in World Conference on women held by the United Nations in Nairobi in 1985 and then argued with more emphasis in the World Conference on women in Beijing in 1995, consists in the adequate consideration in all programs and social and economic interventions of the differences between life conditions, needs and interests of men and women.

The primary purpose behind the principle of gender mainstreaming is to promote equity in terms of conditions between genders: in this view, all programs and measures adopted should be evaluated according to the effects they can produce, in terms of promotion of equal opportunities, on the relationship between men and women in society.

The action and the application of the gender mainstreaming principle in the projects and more generally in the social policies, is a complex process that involves all the phases from the design to the implementation, up to the monitoring and evaluation.

Violence in an intimate relationship

The statistics based on data from researches conducted around the world show how violence against women, as well as being a serious social problem of epidemic proportions, generally takes place within the family. More than the 90 per cent of incidents of violence that occur within the households are in fact crimes committed against a woman (WAVE, 2004).

Violence in the private sphere, intending for private sphere that of intimate relationships, past and present, is characterized by a series of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violent conduct involving, both in the short and in the long term, physical, psychological and existential damages (Baldry, 2006).

This constitutes a serious public health problem that implies costs both for victims and for society (Murphy & Ouimet, 2008).

The definition provided by Baldry (2006), is interesting above all because it underlines the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation and the variety of forms that this may take (physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence).

With respect to psychological violence, in anti-violence centres one is more likely to meet women who have been victims: the damage that these women report are by no means less than those caused by physical abuse in the strictest sense, so much that today, thanks to the case-law development that has become consolidated over time, psychological violence is recognized within the crime of mistreatment.

In this regard, some very detailed complaints have been prepared, minutiously describing the violence suffered by the women in its temporal continuity and multifaceted nature.

In order to make a complaint that well represents the dynamics of violence and the extent of the damages suffered, a facts collection is normally done first by the operators of the anti-violence centres that, by asking target questions, led the woman in telling her own experience again, paying attention to highlight the various forms of violence suffered and the dynamics of the *cycle of violence* (Walker, 1979).

To obtain this goal, the presence of qualified personnel is very important and an *ad hoc* training both of the anti-violence workers and of the legal staff is required; the legal staff function will be to transform the facts collection made in a proper complaint, and then helping women in the whole legal procedure.

Regarding sexual violence, only in recent years, and with difficulty, the awareness that sexual violence is not just perpetrated outside (occasional rape by a stranger) but is very present inside partner's relationship, is starting to rise and to spread. Whenever a woman, for various reasons, does not want to have sexual intercourse with her partner but she is forced to have it, both through a physical coercion or a psychological pressure, this can be fully considered sexual violence. In conjunction with cultural evolution also a legal evolution one is taking place whereby the courts are increasingly starting to acknowledge this kind of violence and to condemn it.

The same cultural and legal evolution is occurring as to economic violence: being prevented to work, to earn money, to use one's own money to provide for one's needs, being thus forced to depend totally from the one's partner, it is a form of violence now indisputably recognized in the courts.

These different forms of violence briefly presented (physical, psychological, economic, sexual) most of the times are not clearly separated from each other, appearing in various combinations within the same intimate relationship. When present, physical violence is nearly always associated with psychological violence. When a partner comes to physically attack his partner it is very likely that this behaviour is accompanied by a conduct of verbal denigration, devaluation, intimidation and threat.

Today, more and more, we are at last managing to let public prosecutors' offices and courts recognize also domestic violence witnessed by minors as an autonomous kind of crime, always through an extensive case-law interpretation of the crime of mistreatment in the family.

The lawyers belonging to feminists groups, associations and cooperatives, actively engaged for years in the field of domestic violence against women, are currently working in order to reach the full recognition of the offence of mistreatment against children even in cases where they have not suffered violence first-hand, but have witnessed violence on their mother. It is important that the acknowledgement takes place both during the preliminary stage of the legal trial, that is, during the formulation of charges by public prosecutors, and above all, in the final phase, concerning the issuing of sentences, allowing the making of a case-law orientation in this sense, able to score an important progress at legal and cultural level. That orientation is already accepted by prosecutors sensitive to this issue, who specifically challenge the offence referred to Art. 572 of the criminal code (mistreatment in the

family or towards children) in case of a minor witnessing the violence of his/her father on his/her mother.

Finally, another interesting aspect of the definition provided by Baldry (2006), is the fact to emphasize how this violent behaviour, as a usual way of behavior, involves, in the short and in the long term, physical damage (evident for example in the scars reported by the women who are victims), but also psychological and existential damages, indicating this way the pervasiveness of the experience of violence in all the spheres of life of those who suffer it.

Starting from the recognition of the endemic nature of this phenomenon, the Council of Europe (recommendation n. 1582 of the 27th of September 2002) and the Economic Committee (recommendation of the 22nd of February 2006) invited Member States to take *measures to protect the health and safety of women*. These recommendations, in addition to confirming the widespread nature of domestic violence against women, existing in all European countries and across all social classes and categories, underline the pervasiveness of the consequences at various levels: home, health, behavior, social relations, education, freedom to live one's own life.

With regard to Italy, despite the diffusion of the phenomenon of violence in an intimate relationship, this remains largely invisible and under reported (D.I.Re, 2010). Although the statistics of the Prosecutor's Office in Rome indicate a slight increase of complaints in 2010, 93 per cent of the victims of intimate partner abuse continue not to report the cases to the police (UN, 2012).

The *women's safety survey*, held in 2006, is the first and currently only existing national study entirely devoted to the phenomenon of physical and sexual violence against women. This study is the result of an agreement between the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) – which led it — and the Minister for Rights and Equal Opportunities – who financed it with funds from the national operational Programme "Safety" and "System Action" of the European Social Fund. Previously some information about this theme had been provided with the *survey on citizens' security*, specifically in the *harassment and sexual violence* section aimed only at women aged 14 to 59 years, carried out respectively in 1997-1998 and in the 2002.

The *women's safety survey*, conducted by telephone interview, had as main goals the knowledge of the widespread phenomenon of violence against women, the forms in which it occurs, the consequences and costs it represents for women, as well as its dynamics and the chance to get out of it. A special attention has been paid to risk factors and to the cycle of violence. The data collect information related to the violence suffered from a man who is not a partner (e.g. a stranger, an acquaintance, a friend, a colleague, a friend of the family, a relative) and to violence perpetrated by a partner (husband, cohabitant, boyfriend). The types of violence under investigation were basically three: the physical, sexual and psychological ones. The persecutors behaviors (stalking) committed by a partner during or after the separation were also investigated. The population of interest included women between 16 and 70 years of age residing in Italy. The survey used as selection list the archive of the fixed public

telephone network subscribers, therefore the sample units have been the phone numbers belonging to this archive.

According to the data reported in the final Report (ISTAT, 2007), the phenomenon of physical and sexual violence by men against women regards, at least once during their lives, 6 million 743 thousand of the women surveyed, equivalent to a third of the women who live in Italy (31.9 per cent). Of these, nearly 4 million have suffered physical violence and about 5 million sexual violence. There are also 2 million and 938 thousand women who, during the survey, have claimed to have suffered physical and/or sexual violence by their current or former partners; 14.3 per cent of women who have or have had a partner in the course of their lives. Interesting enough is the fact that the majority of the victims have suffered more than one episode of violence, or have been a victim of repeated violence, and that this recurrence has taken place more frequently from the partner rather than someone who is not a partner (67.1 per cent against 52.9 per cent). Meaningful and at the same time alarming is also the data reported regarding the percentage of submerged cases: 96 per cent of violence by a non-partner and 93 per cent of those from the partner. This data, as well as that emerging from the above-mentioned UN Report on 2012, shows us how difficult it is for women who suffer a traumatic experience like this to find people to talk to about what they are experiencing. This also happens because of isolation forms implemented by the author of violence, that lead the woman, over time, to be increasingly devoid of a social network. The women who actually denounce the violence suffered or contact an anti-violence centre are definitely a minority compared to the overall number of women who undergo this experience. The ISTAT Report (2007) shows finally as only 18,2 per cent of the women surveyed that have suffered physical or sexual violence in the family considers the violence a criminal offence, 44 per cent see it as something wrong, 36 per cent as something that happened. This data tragically highlighted the lack of awareness, on the part of the victims, of the fact that violence within intimate partner relationships is a crime and that it is a right to turn to the courts to obtain appropriate forms of protection (ISTAT, 2007).

The continuum of domestic violence and its gradual escalation over time is also reflected in the growing number of victims of *femicide* from partner, spouse or former partner (UN, 2012).

Although these data are alarming, the phenomenon continues however to be underestimated in the context of a patriarchal society where violence in an intimate relationship is not always perceived as a crime, where the victims are largely economically dependent on the authors of violence, and where the perception that the State's response to the problem is not appropriate or useful persists (UN, 2012).

Feminist realities engaged in the fight against gender violence

To cope with the phenomenon of violence against women in the various parts of the world, denouncing the lack of attention and institutional responses, various groups and civil society organisations, mostly feminist, have for years been engaged in

supporting women victims, also referred to as survivors, providing integrated assistance at a legal, medical, psychological and social level.

An Italian example in this sense is the cooperative *BeFree*.

BeFree Social Cooperative against trafficking, violence and discrimination is a private social reality created in 2007 by a group of long-time professionals working in the field of gender-based violence and trafficking in human beings. The decision to create an only female cooperative in order to intervene on the problem of gender-based violence in its various forms, represents a choice both political and professional, being in line with the recommendations of the United Nations and the bodies of the Council of Europe with respect to intervention with women victims of violence. The Cooperative is composed of various professionals: psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, cultural mediators, lawyers. The multidisciplinary of the team is linked to the complexity of the phenomenon that the Cooperative intends to address.

The basic assumption underpinning the practice of intervention of *BeFree* is to consider them as people in need rather than as “criticism” of a perfect system; proof, a *symptom*, of a system in itself flawed. In other words, the personal difficulty, in this case the experience of suffering violence, is considered by the Cooperative not as an issue concerning the single woman, but as a social product, that is, as a phenomenon which involves the interpersonal dimension, the relational sphere, and it has cultural and socio-political roots which must necessarily be taken into consideration in order to implement effective interventions.

Priority objectives of the intervention are: the reconstruction of the social network of the woman victim of violence, the promotion of her access to community resources, the development of relations able to offer her various forms of social support (instrumental, emotional, informational).

The Cooperative currently manages three services:

- *Sportello Donna H24 (Woman Help-Desk H24)*, located within the Emergency Department of the San Camillo Forlanini Hospital (Rome) and aimed at women victims of domestic and sexual violence. This is the first pilot experience in Italy of an anti-violence help-desk inside an emergency department that provides the physical presence of a professional operating 24 hours on 24, 365 days per year. The emergency departments are places where very often women victims of violence go to treat the wounds caused by their partners. To intervene in these places allows a professional to reach a wide slice of the submerged, i.e. those women, belonging to the 93 per cent indicated by ISTAT (2007), which will not appeal to an anti-violence centre nor will present a legal complaint because prevented, afraid, uninformed, or not yet aware of the violence. In this case the intervention occurs in a totally different way compared to a traditional anti-violence centre: not considering the type of users, above all the type of intervention changes, in this case, very often the request for help is either absent or not explicit. The goal then becomes to stimulate the formulation of a request for intervention in order to overcome the violent situation. This diversity of setting and goals implies a major rethinking of the professional practice adopted;

- *Psychosocial and legal counselling office*, aimed at women victims of trafficking for

purposes of sexual or labour exploitation at the Centre of Identification and Expulsion (C.I.E) of Ponte Galeria (Rome). This is one of 13 administrative detention centres, scattered on Italian territory, for migrant persons without regular residence permit;

- *Sportello SOS Donna H24 (SOS Woman H24 Help-Desk)*, aimed at women and children victims of violence. The service provides in daytime the physical presence of professionals and the person responsible, at night telephone availability: an active phone with a professional who, when called, takes in hand the situation and intervenes. The service is special because it not only works as a classic anti-violence centre, where it is the woman who calls and takes up an appointment for an interview, but it also provides on-site interventions. It can happen for example to receive calls on the part of law enforcement to intervene in the case in which a woman goes to them to denounce the violence which she is undergoing: in this case the professional goes to the police station in order to support the woman over the course of the complaint, that she may choose to present directly there with the law enforcement, or later at the same help-desk. The same thing happens when a call is received by a hospital or other local agencies.

It is within this latter service, *SOS Woman H24 Help-Desk*, that has been developed the self-help experience presented in this contribution.

In addition to the self-help activity, the service offers:

- ▲ *Telephone and telematic listening*: a phone number, promoted by the Municipality of Rome, to which the women who need help can call and receive a first listener. The goal of this activity is to make a first analysis of the request of the woman and to possibly schedule an interview at the service or intervene on-site. An e-mail address is also available for electronic requests;

- ▲ *Reception*: after the telephone or telematic contact, if the professionals detect a request on the part of the woman, a first interview is scheduled at the service whose aim is to try to understand what kind of intervention is possible to activate in order to respond effectively to the needs presented;

- ▲ *Telephone availability and emergency interventions H24*: external interventions on-site (hospitals, police stations, etc.), which takes place always on call;

- ▲ *Specialist advice (legal, medical, psychological)*, activated according to the presented needs;

- ▲ *Cultural mediation*, activated in the case of foreign women;

- ▲ *Technical and clinical supervision of the professionals*: in order to allow a final reflection on the work done by the operators and the person responsible;

- ▲ *Actions in support of the mother-child relationship*;

- ▲ *Social communication campaigns*.

Foster self-help with women victims of violence in intimate relationships

Before presenting and discussing the self-help experience for women victims of intimate partner violence which is the subject of this contribution, it seems necessary to focus on two key questions:

1) *What are the self-help groups?*

2) *Why promoting self-help groups for women with experience of intimate partner violence?*

Self-help groups

The self-help movements arise within a new concept of health promotion, declined in Ottawa Charter, drawn up in 1986 by the WHO, as *<<a process that enables people to increase control over their health and improve it>>*: a conception that focuses, as protagonists, the same people who live certain existential situations.

The self-help movement comes from non professional fields of the community and it structures itself from “criticism” in relation to the limits of the official services in meeting the needs of citizens (Ornelas, 1993, 1996). Its main purpose is therefore that, in line with what declared by the Ottawa Charter, to promote greater participation, control and autonomy of people in the process of resolution of their problems.

Starting from these assumptions, the self-help groups can be defined as an example of relational community seeking to meet the needs of affiliate and sharing of people, promoting supportive environments that facilitate the adaptation and generate sense of community (Ornelas, 2008). They are born in order to satisfy a need, to overcome a problem, to change in a mutual way.

Since the term empowerment means the process of acquiring power, control, upon one’s life and problems, self-help can be fully considered as a form of empowerment (Adams, 1990).

In the last decades, groups and self-help organizations have grown significantly throughout the world.

The *Alcoholics Anonymous* – historical and best worldwide known self-help movement– that in 1942 had about 50 groups in the United States, they are nowadays an organization with thousands of local groups and approximately 2 million members worldwide (Levine, Perkins, Perkins, 2005).

The huge variety and evolving nature of self-help activities, makes it difficult to identify unique and distinctive features. Groups are born and die all the time. The level of involvement by the same people who participate in them is extremely varied as is also the focus of self-help activities (Adams, 1990).

Regardless of the multiple forms of self-help, all self-help groups consist of *<<people who are in the same boat>>* (Caplan, 1974, p. 23).

These groups have four essential characteristics that distinguish them from other support systems: the peer relationship, reciprocity, knowledge of experience and autonomy (Ornelas, 2008). The members of the self-help groups relate among peers and develop a supportive relationship based on reciprocity, whereby each member within the group lends and at the same time receives support, continuously alternating between these two roles.

It is important to remember that one of the fundamental premises of self-help is that one serves as helper, i.e. he or she who lends help is beneficial because it increases the feeling of social usefulness and competence of members, creating opportunities to see the problems differently and meet more adaptive strategies to address them (Riessman, 1990). The opportunity to help others is itself a process of empowerment, since it promotes the recruitment of a new, more active role, socially useful and valued and of a greater sense of control over certain aspects of one's life (Ornelas, 2008).

In addition, the reciprocal nature of relations within the self-help groups, undo the feeling of dependence and fragility inherent in the attitude to ask for and receive help (Riessman, 1990). The reciprocal nature of the relationship between peers, does not imply that there are no organizational structures in the groups but that, unlike the professional care systems, roles are defined operationally and chosen by its members (Levy, 2000).

Generally the organizational functioning structure of self-help groups allows all participants to fill valued roles and to be involved in the group life, promotes the sharing of leadership, allows the development of skills of active participation (Ornelas, 2008).

Another key feature of self-help, consists in the enhancement of knowledge of experience, constructed from the personal experience of each one in addressing the shared problem. This knowledge is shared within the self-help meetings and is used as an intervention strategy to resolve the problems of the members of the group (Roberts *et al.*, 1999). The sharing of personal experiences within the group allows knowledge validation and enables the learning of new ways to see, interpret and deal with the problems and the personal and collective situations associated.

For people whose social status is depreciated and stigmatized, participation in the group can also help to create a new identity, or personal and collective narrative, more positive and valued (Rappaport, 1993).

Last but not least, a distinctive feature of the self-help groups from other groups is the autonomy from formal systems of care. The control over these groups way of functioning depend only on the people who constitute them (Francescato, Tomai, Ghirelli, 2002).

Permanent groups led by professionals must not be regarded as self-help groups, but as support groups. This does not mean that there may not exist a collaboration between self-help groups and professionals of various services. The type of relationship and cooperation varies from group to group, depending on the history of that specific group, the type of people that compose it and the type of problem that is shared (Ornelas, 2008).

The primary and common key factors that intervene in the action of self-help groups and explain their undoubted –even if difficult to measure - transformative efficacy are therefore: the feeling of belonging to a relational community; the informative, emotional and material support, mutually exchanged among members; the reinforcement and identification processes inherent in social-emotional dynamics among peers who share the same existential situation; the therapeutic value of

experiencing oneself as a helper; the ideological thrust, i.e. the dimension of values, generally very strong in self-help groups and important in activating the transformative process (Ornelas, 2008; Francescato, Tomai, Ghirelli, 2002).

As regards the classification of the different types of groups, given their extreme variety, various proposals have been made over time. Francescato and Putton (1995) have identified the following 4 types of self-help groups:

- ▲ behavioral control groups (such as *Alcoholics Anonymous*);
- ▲ groups of people with disabilities or chronic illnesses;
- ▲ groups of relatives of people with serious problems;
- ▲ groups of people crossing a period of crisis.

According to this classification, the self-help group born inside the *SOS Woman H24 Help-Desk* falls under the fourth category (groups of people who experience a crisis period): the participants are all women who go through a critical period, coinciding with the traumatic experience of being subjected to violence by their partners, experience that has dramatically and tragically affected their lives.

Self-help and violence within intimate relationships

The reasons to promote, alongside individual modes of intervention, forms of self-help among women victims of an experience of violence from their partners are different.

Before analysing the effectiveness of the specific mechanisms of this type of groups activate, it is important to identify some issues, specific of the problematic here analysed, which can be object of transformation within these groups:

–*The battered woman syndrome* (Walker, 1977, 1984), an expression coined by Leonore Walker in an attempt to apply to domestic violence the *learned helplessness* paradigm of Seligman (1975). Seligman (1975) indicated with *learned helplessness* that prostration condition, apathy, loss of hope and of resourcefulness where a person falls after suffering for a long time a painful or distressing condition which, despite his/her efforts, he/she could not object to and which was unable to escape. Walker (1977, 1984) conceptualizes as follows, that women who for a long time are exposed to a violent conduct within an intimate relationship, learn, over time, the experience of helplessness. This happens because the violence that is perpetrated from the partner is not controllable or predictable, and the woman finds herself trying to control the succession of situations where, whatever she does, she is punished or abused without a comprehensible criterion. The effect is to annihilate the perception of control over external events: the feeling of helplessness learned produces cognitive, motivational and emotional consequences, drastically reduces the self-esteem and can also lead to depression.

–*The social isolation*: most women victims of violence from their partners are isolated, they have a social network very fragmented, sometimes almost non-existent. Women who suffer violence from their partner are often prisoners in their own

homes. The violent partner controls every movement they make, preventing them to lead independent lives and to have friendships and social contacts in general. In this regard, the American psychiatrist Judith Herman (1992) speaks of *home imprisonment* comparing it to a political one.

–*The blame– self-blame*: in most cases the woman is blamed by the violent partner. It is also very common that these women will blame themselves for what happened (<<*is my fault if this happened, if I behaved differently, if I did what he asked me, he would not perpetrate violence*>>) and this attitude of self-blame is often related to the strong psychological violence suffered, which can lead victims to believe that what they have suffered is mostly their fault.

–*The labelling of women as "victims of violence"*: very often, not in anti-violence centres but in other unspecialized territorial centres, can be carried out by the same professionals as a sort of attribution to the woman of the label of "victims of violence", as if that was her unique and immutable identity, without alternative for change. This labelling may make the woman experience a feeling of inevitability of their condition.

–*The feeling of inferiority and inadequacy compared to professionals*: it may happen that these women can feel inadequate relating and confronting people who have not had their own experience, going so far as to think that they are themselves in the wrong, inappropriate, not having done enough to prevent the violence or to have left before .

Promoting forms of self-help among women victims of intimate partner violence, what happens is that the group starts to function as a relational community and a primary source of support (informational, emotional, material), allowing these women to rebuild a social network and not feeling more alone in addressing a complex and painful situation which is the experience to suffer violence. Through the process of confrontation, identification and reflection with other women who share or have shared the same experience, participants can feel less guilty, less inadequate and less alone. The feeling of being the only one to have experienced violence, a feeling very common among these women, disappears.

Very often women who suffer violence, especially on the part of their partner, do not find outside, e.g. in its familiar and friendly network, people who believe their experience. Discussing in the group with others who have experienced similar situations and feeling in turn recognized and believed, is a very important experience in terms of transformation. This experience allows one to eradicate a series of false convictions, such as being the only to have gone through such an experience, and provides a concrete opportunity for participants to make sure that what happened to them happened to others. Discussing among peers, feeling that violence is an experience common to others, each one with her own specific but at the same time partly similar situation, helps these women to regain respect in themselves. This

confrontation, reflection, identification, also allows to work on the deep emotion of guilt, trying to give it another meaning .

Sharing with others also provides the opportunity to learn new and/or different strategies for dealing with situations and problems, often common, that arise during and after the coming out of a situation of violence (e.g. with regards to the judiciary path). Moreover, if a participant gives testimony to the others to have succeeded, to have been able to rebuild her life, also the other members of the group can expect to succeed. Direct experience that change is possible and that violence, although difficult and painful, is an experience that you can get out of, is very important. It allows women to start to re-gain confidence in their abilities, promoting a process of individual and group empowerment and ensuring that the experience of “being a victim” does not crystallize into a dimension of identity.

Another fundamental aspect promoted by the dynamic of self-help is related to the experimentation of the role of helper that enables participants to experience themselves not only as the “one who is assisted” but also as the “one who can help the others”, providing instrumental or informative support, or taking an empathetic, supportive and reassuring attitude.

Finally, respecting the uniqueness of each story, the self-help group allows, through the comparison of different personal stories, to analyse the common root that legitimates and substantiates in general violence against women: a root constituted by power, differences between men and women. In this sense, the self-help allows a personal crisis to turn into a social experience contextualized in a socio-political and a cultural, wider dimension, sometimes ending in forms of social and political participation in order to defend the rights and the fairness of opportunities and power within the society (Ornelas, 2008). It is thus promoted the transition from an individual identity/narrative of "victim", to an individual and collective identity/narrative of "survivor", active protagonist of one's life (Costa, Duarte, 2000).

The group *The Phoenicians flying towards Ithaca*

The Phoenicians flying towards Ithaca, is a self-help group born in January 2011 inside the *SOS Woman H24 Help-Desk*.

The decision to promote a self-help experience, rather than a support group with the steady conduction of a psychologist, was dictated by the reasons presented above concerning the effectiveness of self-help and by the fact that all women participating continue in parallel to carry on a supporting personal path at the same centre, having individual counselling sessions in order to process the experience of violence suffered and reconstruct their life projects.

The women involved in the self-help experience were initially five, all Italian except one of Colombian origin. Right at the start, after a few meetings, two Italian women abandoned the group and two new participants joined it, an Italian and an Argentine woman. After a year and a half since its formation, one of the Italians and the Colombian participant came out of the group, but in return another three women, two Italian and one Algerian joined it. At present, the group consists of six women, four Italians, one Argentine and one Algerian, all between the ages of 30 and 55.

All the participants, migrants and Italians, are individually helped by the service *SOS Woman H24* in the process of overcoming the violence caused by the partner and all have expressed their willingness to participate in the self-help group, to meet other women with the same experience, share and exchange support at different levels. The group by definition and choice of the same participants is constantly open to new entries.

Since January 2011 onwards, the group has been meeting every month, twice a month for two hours.

For its launch, the group was inspired by the model of development of self-help groups proposed by Francescato (Francescato & Putton, 1995). This model gives an active role to professionals in the promotion and launch of groups (Silverman, 2002). The innovative proposal of self-help is to focus on the internal resources of participating individuals and on the support of the group rather than of an expert. The professional has the task to identify the common problem, facilitate the aggregation of people and assist the start-up phase, promoting the beginning of group autonomy and planning his/her "death". In the model proposed by Francescato (Francescato & Putton, 1995) the "death" of the professional means the end of the necessity of carrying out his/her function.

The presence of an expert in the group must be reduced to a few meetings, mainly concentrated in the initial phase, with the objective of promoting the group's psychological identity, the definition among the participants of explicit and implicit norms, the identification of objectives, roles and functions, and the development of the necessary skills to participate and lead a group discussion.

Discussion of experience

The primary objective of the psychologist involved in launching this experience, since the first meetings of the group, was on the one hand to work towards the construction of its own group identity and on the other to promote a gradual process of disengagement from the professional support, working on the dependence dimensions and focusing on the promotion of the group's competence to autonomy. This process has proved to be neither easy nor linear and has involved the reshaping of the guidelines for the establishment and the start-up of self-help groups proposed by Francescato (Francescato & Putton, 1995). The inexperience of the participants, for the first time involved in a self-help experience, has been one of the critical elements, making it more difficult to renounce to the reassurance and containment function given by the presence of a professional. Some aspects on which the professional had to work more were the group's difficulty in time management, in the identification of discussion themes and, in general, in the management of the group process. Furthermore, an additional complexity was due to the fact that, given the very nature of the group, formed on the basis of sharing an experience of crisis (such as that of violence), by itself hopefully transitory, group membership has organized itself on a basically transitory nature. This implies that the group should now and then face the task of the elaboration of the "mourning" subsequent to the abandonment of the group by some participants who, having overcome the crisis, have identified other

priorities. This process is physiological, indeed even evolutionary, since it marks the achievement of a greater degree of autonomy by those who leave the group.

Despite this intrinsic aspect, it is important to note that several participants have expressed the desire to remain in the group, even after overcoming their crisis situation, providing others with their experience.

Ultimately, despite the various difficulties faced, the outcome of the experience is positive.

To date, the group, that has named itself *The Phoenixes flying towards Ithaca*, has basically reached total autonomy. The psychologist currently acts just as a counsellor, providing supervision to the meetings carried out autonomously by the women who formed the group or intervening in case of specific crisis situations. The group has managed to become a relational community, able to meet the needs of affiliation and sharing of the participants (Ornelas, 2008) and to activate reciprocal and autonomous forms of informational, emotional and instrumental support (Francescato, Tomai, Ghirelli, 2002). Some women have managed to solve their legal or working problems through the support of the others. Frequently the participants have been active, even outside the group, helping concretely their companions. Following the tradition of *gender-associated groups* (Adams, 1990), it is interesting to point out that the group has worked continuously, and in an integrated manner, both at the level of individual problems and the growth of single participants, and at the level of raising awareness about the cultural and socio-political dynamics that permit and encourage violence against women. A further aim has been to promote the change of the conditions of gender inequality in the society (*advocacy*).

Probably what is missing today, to turn the group completely autonomous, is the acquisition, beside the skill in leading the group, of the ability to question oneself and constantly reflect on what is the need of the group and of its participants (the relationship between individual and group needs), on the dynamic evolution of these needs, and on the related transformation of the group objectives and functions over time in order to cope with them.

A testimony

In conclusion, I would like to bring the testimony of a woman participant in the self-help group *The Phoenicians flying towards Ithaca* that, with the vividness of her words, she recounts this experience from her point of view, the internal one, of one who lived it:

<<It is just over a year that I came to SOS 24, and for some months I have been participating in a self-help group. SOS woman is the right name for those who, like me, no longer knows where to turn to and tries with what she sees as the last hope.

Actually we are six, we are supported by F.

Sometimes some do not come. But how to make the other components come, when we all know perfectly well that the single situations are very heavy to bear?

We decided to call ourselves "The Phoenicians" because we feel that we will be born again, though from our ashes, and that together we will succeed.

What always happens, when we see each other, no matter how many we are, is a total exchange of confidence and trust in our future and in that of the children who are experiencing the heavy situations we have.

Sometimes, staying there, I totally forget what happened to me and I feel I want to start to live "normally" again. If I think about when I arrived, I see myself as a woman alone and hopeless that didn't know what door to knock on to find some trust in the future. Today I feel hopeful and eager to live. The exchange of our experience and the fortitude others have transmitted to me, have given me again the boost to live a full life again.

During our meetings there is no judgment, nor disbelief in listening, because we all know, on our skin, unfortunately, what the others say it may happen, and we should not always try to convince those listening that we are telling the truth and not lying. Unfortunately we all know well the dynamics that accumulate in certain situations.

We want the group open to other women who need it because it is important that others have the opportunity to meet each other, to begin a path of ascent.

You acknowledge a woman mistreated by how she looks at you, by her posture and the fear she has in expressing her thought; if others like us come, we will help them to raise their gaze and to look forward and not their feet with the head down and I am sure that they will have a lot to say and give us through their experiences>>.

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