

## **Women victims of violence: Taking charge and impact of the work on the professional helpers**

*Oria Gargano*

### **Abstract**

Individual stories of women victims of violence from their partners should be analysed in the light of a commune denominator, their future in a social context, a culture, a system of roles, prejudices and stereotypes still marked by the idea of subalternity of the female gender.

To support the women to cope in this perspective with the events that have wounded them represents a focal point of specialized reception, as it allows the "victims" to unravel a series of doubts, inadequacies and personal guilt in a clear vision of the general context, which formed *the "background" of their biography*. This allows the professional helper to address them with an empathic, non judging attitude and be able to tailor interventions and produce suitable personalized projects.

**Key words:** women, violence, social context, operators group

The women's biographies are a sequence of episodes rooted in a context of historical relationships between genders where male predominance is still sharp and clear, and the founding archetypes of the patriarchal system are perceived with great evidence.

To accompany them becoming aware of this fact means *to return them back to their potentialities, to help them face and overcome the shocks sustained, to provide them with a critical look on their surrounding world*.

When the professional helper succeeds in contextualizing in the "system" where the victim was involved a series of critical points and difficulties, she feels relieved from the weight of frontal job, and it is easier for her to feel empathic and concerned, to get involved in active listening, to integrate many facts emerging in the interview through her own *knowledge of the psychological mechanisms of submission, in the containment of anxieties and distress*

For sure this condition helps maintain a well-balanced and non judging attitude toward the women who came up against experiences of violent relationships, and had to sip the consequences up to the last drop of it. The *evil* consequences and the *misleading* ones, the *negation* and the *recognition* ones (even if somehow biased).

It is easy to fall into the temptation to simply consider them victims, and try to assist them by hetero-directing them, and so replacing the dictats of violent partners with a mild, or strict, pedantic teaching. It is wrong to make a reception based on an often unconscious *transitivity*, i.e. it's good for you what's good for me, for the society I belong to.

The women asking to be included in personalized exit projects have been abused, raped, deceived and disenchanted, victims of crimes camouflaged by a distorted and

widespread social perception that mistakes the masculine craving for possession with the love of man for the woman.

They have been deprived of their own *self-perception*, sapped of their *self-esteem* and for even long periods got entangled in relations they wanted, or were obliged to consider, "love".

An effective help relationship requests competence in all the crimes they were subjected to, and the proper know-how to deal with each single offence..

*They cannot be simply considered "subjects in difficulty", to be included in neutral reception contexts and not based on gender approach.*

All the more so if, on the whole, the most attentive and concerned areas of the *Social Service* are now taking into account the indications determined by the feminist movement, following the growing awareness that a new interpretation of the society is needed, a prerequisite condition in view of supplying a really effective support.

Lena Dominelli, a leading figure in the British social area, while acknowledging the need to supply social services based on a gender perspective, points out and questions the conventional trend of the professional helpers:

<<to nourish too high expectations from the women, as if patience and endurance were imprinted in their genetic patrimony; apart from blaming them when they don't stand the incongruous burden they have been forced to bear (...). In doing so the helpers contribute to stigmatize them, make them feel inadequate and disbelieve the resources they still can exploit>> (Dominelli, 2004).

Even if stiffness and prejudice are not suited to a fruitful reception, it is definitely unproductive to contrast these attitudes with the opposite, i.e. *by justifying by all means, overemphasizing victimization, or showing a form of parental compassion that confines the persons to emotional dependency which prevents their personal growth.*

On the feminist part, a response to these realistic dangers should (could) be "Solidarity without innocence", a behaviour described in these terms by Ida Dominijanni many years ago:

<< *Since the beginning, in the way women act out solidarity between them there has been a germ undermining the very basis of this concept, as traditionally perceived. The germ is the method of starting from one's own self, a well-known founding technique in the practice of self-consciousness, since then never discarded in the subsequent feminist practices. This method changes the barycentre of the solidarity principle. While the principle prescribes to reach out to the other, the method prevents the possibility of doing so without being centred on one's own self. Not on egoism (as a classical polarization between solidarity and egoism would let intend) but more exactly on personal desire and contradictions, seen as unavoidable data for a pattern of political activity that does not separate goals from means, will from imagination, the strength of exterior action from obstacles and interior resilience, an altruistic behaviour towards the powerless from the analysis of one's own collusion with power. This way, acting out solidarity is*

*not nullified, but rather complicated, it no longer maintains the innocence of a simple emotion and the evidence of a high commandment. It is impossible to effectively reach out to the others without making an issue of yourself, and putting yourself at stake. (...). The crucial point is not to show solidarity to them and claim the task to represent their issues, even perhaps on the grounds of incorrect criteria, but to foster empowerment and elicit from them self-consciousness and the power of speech.>> (Dominijanni, 1995).*

This is the task of the professional helper, who perhaps could not have access to academic and institutional education centres fit to teach her the way to match gender perspective with her frontal work. She is perhaps not even equipped with appropriate reference books, and yet, in her work, she never gives up awareness of the importance of a political relationship between women, a concept resulting from her personal experiences.

This kind of approach has very practical implications in the reception pattern and in defining personalized social re-promotion paths aimed at *de-victimizing* the women willing to work out the mechanisms that led them fall victims of violence and ready to never more slide in that shady territory, a land of insecurity derived from a general social context where the difference between man and woman is seen, lived, and worked out as a “minus”.

The outcome, the added value, the critical points, the regrets and the achievements of a support practice modelled on the women’s political way of keeping relations among them is *something still very little explored, a material definitely in fiery, about which no codified systems exist.*

Therefore, the work should consist in constantly *borrowing-pouring off-implementing* good practices from a field to another, while keeping awareness that *know-how* binds you to a series of re-considerations and re-adjustments and *data processing* must acknowledge these facts, in order for *actions* to be re-shaped and updated in an endless course which could eventually attain questionable certitudes.

After all

<<A real experience interrupts the *continuum* between anticipation-expected answer, and makes us feel unsure with respect to the known. But this also allows us to learn, to drop off no longer functional schemes and makes us aware of our limits and of our being moving on>> (*Politelli, 2004*).

This representation seems tailor-made for the work of the professional helpers, who are free in their research but not indeterminate in probing new intervention forms. They hold on to their gender consciousness and within it they *introduce innovations/seize on new hints/modify the ways* in which that consciousness is modulated.

What has happened to the victims of violence and ill-treatment is the nightmare of every woman, is likely to happen in her and everyone other’s life and represents a whole range of the inferiorities women have historically been charged for.

In order to succeed in supporting women at best, a strong training is needed in daily practice in defence of gender human rights.

The whole help relationship that is created aims at reaching a definite goal, i.e. to make it possible *to practice trust*.

**Trust** should not be understood as *relying on*, for this would mean to drop out of responsibility and hampering a real growth. Here “trust” means an *essential component of any relationship, the trait-d’union* between definite and distinct subjects and individualities, a *plus* which makes reliable and feasible the projects of social reintegration. *Without this substantial element support turns into dependency, charity, inequality, uneven exchange* between a person asking for help and another basking in giving.

When the woman feels to trust the Service and its professional helpers, she *qualifies herself* as a credible and aware person able to lead her life, and to recognize her value without tricks, cunning and blandishments, all those little means used to obtain benefits, which are historically typical of the categories who have to make do. They have to resort to slyness and ruse, a kind of “rough copy” of intelligence, awareness and deepness, reserved to people who do not have other instruments, as the inferior classes, or the “weaker sex”.

*So, for the professional helper* trusting the woman doesn’t mean to be “good to her” in a simplistic way. On the contrary, it means being aware about all the contradictions and the complications typical of any human and female story. It also means being conscious that women’s spirit of survival often leads them to develop a strong sense of self-protection, and allows them to invest all their personal possibilities, their imagination and their capabilities on a feasible strategy.

*In these terms, the pact is clear, unambiguous and impossible to be misunderstood.*

The woman feels that the professional helper *values the courage* she has showed on escaping from the condition she was forced to live in, and the life projects agreed upon are valuable. This gives her a soothing feeling as she starts to really believe and invest in her *social re-integration*.

On her part, the professional helper makes use of the “*method of trust*” as an available tool fit to plan effective individual projects with the women.

From this point of view, trust looks like

*<<the selective assumption of a reliability criterion which makes people free to accept risks and to start actions having uncertain results, or to carry on social relations even when the conditions seem to be precarious and imply a degree of vulnerability.>>* (Roniger, 1992). The professional helper, who has worked and who is still working on herself, knows very well that *<<giving trust is always risky and problematic; it means on the one hand to recognize each other’s integrity and identity, and on the other refers to the concept of reliability as a form of mutual commitment not to deceiving or betraying each other>>* (Berti, 2005).

Trusting the woman in front of us, who comes charged with the overwhelming weight of her terrible experiences, is a first step of the *taking care method*, an empathic moment full of difficulties and criticalities for the supported woman/professional helper relationship. This path favours an optimistic and possibilistic attitude in tackling the unknown course of working with somebody

perceived as a peer, even if usually both perceive themselves as “different” from each other.

In other words,

<<Trust is a kind of “risk investment”, and giving trust to someone is a highly rational attitude, because it implies an accurate assessment between costs and benefits>> (Berti , 2005).

*In order to facilitate the helper in this kind of exercise, frequent staff and technical supervising meetings should be planned, in order to practice and discuss the method of trust because, as above mentioned, it is not foregone and acquired once and forever, and needs to be constantly revised and readjusted.*

It is hard to go deep into such twists and turns of one’s mind without being intrusive, without offending or denying the emotions. We always risk to slide toward a sense of *otherness*, to build a kind of barrier between our lives and theirs, and to hamper any possibility of communicating. In these situations, it can be helpful to remind that we are all women and we share the same cultural, political and social *humus* which is impossible to remove and overtake, unless through a strong practice of **empathy**. This consists in constant self-analysis and in the capacity to put ourselves at stake in a form of relationship that we cannot merely define “help relation”, but “*relation between women*”.

Working for such a global project means to work for the highest objective: changing culture and long determined gender relationships, in order to support and to spread a real social well-being.

### **The method of approach/ the interview**

The practice of a political relation among women in the anti-violence services, has created a different approach, equidistant from the analytical interview and the social worker interviews, based on the crucial insight of the so-called *gender dimension*.

Thanks to this insight we have already achieved some remarkable results, but in our opinion, this concept needs to be further refined.

The huge frontal work carried out up to now, has withdrawn some time to the reflection on what is an interview, which are the expectations at stake, who are the charming and precarious characters who get in touch within this relationship – the woman victim and the professional helper.

The right overtaking of structured formats –the psychotherapist, and the social worker ones– left total free way towards *shipping in blue water*, a risky and hazardous situation in terms of repetitiveness, standardization, unconscious transfer on the professional helper’s part, as well as discomfort and discontent on the woman’s part.

Many years of experience in dedicated services for women convinced us that it is crucial to plan and implement a specific kind of approach.

This means a sort of perfectible “best practices”, method cages where it could be possible to try and catch what is however *unutterable*.

### ***Skill exercises for the professional helper***

Be Free professional helpers have projected and implemented, thanks to the numerous years of experience in anti-violence services, an inseparable binomial combining research and practice. It is indeed inseparable because

<<every project implies the construction of a relationship (...) and you can call it a relationship only when it is build up by all the interlocutors, at the aim of realizing a common goal through expertise as well as feelings and emotions.>> (Zini & Miodini, 2004).

In thousands of interviews, our professional helper developed the knowledge of a *communicative skill* which can be defined as the implicit corollary of the feminist practice known as “*starting from ourselves*”, which includes not only empathy and sharing, but also protocols and agreements that can be helpful for women as well as for helpers.

The *role* of the professional helper is surely less defined compared with the one of social workers, psychologists or psychiatrists.

The borders of her *otherness* are less marked off, because the professional helper *shares* with the women their sufferance, knowing that they both live in the same social and symbolic space where the violence takes place.

However, in the practice, this often produces *confusion*, due to the lack of specific and shared protocols, and for this reason we think they are really necessary.

These reflections assume a particular importance in the managing of an anti-violence service where the three aspects *know-how*, *know to do* and *know to be* need to be combined with a peculiar target: a sort of magmatic universe, not only for the diversity of women victims of violence, abuses, maltreatments (these condition can afflict all the social, professional, cultural and economic levels) but also for the different method that this approach bring with it.

The woman can ask for help on her own initiative, but can also get in touch with the anti-violence service thanks to the collaboration of an emergency room of a hospital, or a police station, etc.

In this second case, the presence of a professional helper plays a double and contradiction role: it is a kind of surplus value but also a critical issue.

On one hand the fact that a professional helper is present in an institutional place suggests the woman that *society is committed* in problems related to violence against women and recognizes importance and dignity to her sufferance.

On the other hand, the approach could be more difficult because it is not said that the woman is wishful to receive the professional helper's support. In these cases, it is crucial not to sound *intrusive* or *pushing*.

The woman is in a particular stressful moment – think of an emergency room of a hospital, or a police station - sometimes she is shocked, or in a spin, and maybe she has no intention to talk to someone like a professional helper, and to confide and name what happened to her.

So, we need to be extremely careful, as we risk to be interpreted from the woman as a replication, *mutatis mutandis*, of the directive attitude experienced from her violent partner.

The intervention will be strictly pragmatic in this case: the helper will gather the salient data about the victim from the report of the sending services, when possible, will examine it in an objective and realistic way, then explain the woman all the possible resources she could benefit in terms of *legal assistance, housing and psycho-social support, leaving her the total freedom to use them or not.*

A right approach will be seen by the woman as an important opportunity. Thanks to the presence and the mediation of the professional helper, who is able to manage such a critical situation and to hold down the woman distress, she would be supported and would feel secure to face the structure and the professionals who work there.

This kind of intervention aims at the hinging of a help relationship that the woman can continue and deepen in the future, respecting her own pace.

As the desk is open h24, for 365 days a year, the activities must combine the capacity of making projects with reference to individual problems with the competence of giving information and suggestions about all relevant services that can be useful for women.

The desk is addressed to Italian and foreign women victims of violence, abuses and maltreatments, or with any kind of gender discrimination, and to minors victims or witnesses of violence.

The net that all the involved actors can activate is an important resource to be available for the personalized projects of the women.

We are now going to focus on the basic parameters for the construction of a revealing relation, in order to set up the right preambles for a real and effective escape of the woman from violence.

We think is important to respect a certain pattern of interview, based on:

- Explicit rules, clearly expressed from the professional helper;
- Implicit rules (such as attitude and behavior of the professional helper and the woman during the interview)
- Formal and not casual structure of the interview (opening, development, conclusion, indication for the prosecution...)
- A specific content (individuation and examination of the problem, request of information, drawing up of a collaborative contract...)
- Definition of both roles (professional helper, woman), and awareness about their complementarity (Lerma, 1992).
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This clear description, regarding the practice of the Social Service, needs to be integrated at the light of the specificity of anti-violence services, where violence against women is perceived as a sign of the inequality that afflict all the female gender.

The relation with women is marked by an explicit *factiousity*, a term that we use intentionally knowing its provocative significance, and borrowing Assunta Signorelli's interpretation when she speaks about victims of trafficking (2001):

*<<Factiousity: to take the point of view of a part as a key to read and explain the non-said, making explicit that discontent always hidden and*

*denied in the name of a global vision that, in the end, never satisfy no one. From this gender perspective, words such as fact, relation, subjectivity become new, they enter in the daily life and there they assume alternatively different and something opposed characteristics>>.*

*Sharing the objective* with the woman permit her to cut out a situation that prejudices her fundamental rights and makes her feel welcomed and believed, which is extremely important, because it is hard for the women victims of violence to find a place where feeling free to express without risking to be misunderstood.

Generally speaking, the violent man is a totally “normal” person: he is not a drug-addicted, neither an alcohol-addicted, nor a psychopathic. He is usually perfectly integrated in the society and often is nice and kind with all the people he meets out of his house.

The violence he acts within his domestic sphere is his “*dark side*”, is a kind of mystery that slowly becomes a secret, because the woman herself keeps these facts in the isolation of her dangerous intimacy.

So, even the closest people find hard to believe the woman when she decides to talk about the subjected violence; how such a “normal”, nice and good man can be described as a monster?

Maybe she exaggerates, maybe she is the one who have problems, maybe she “crossed the line”.

An intrusive and constant back-thought gives the women responsibilities and faults, always.

A stratified culture over thousands of years celebrates and organizes the subalternity of female gender – for example the “*ius corrigendi*”, the right of using authoritarian and violent educative tools, has been considered acceptable up to not many years ago – and maybe, in the deep of consciences, it is still so.

In order to make the woman feel the *physical and symbolic place* that is welcoming her, it is necessary an adequate *setting*.

The setting must be organized at the aim of facilitating the communication – verbal and non verbal, aware and unaware, considering all that languages such as proxemics, kinesics, external aspects- avoiding any kind of obstacle that can mine the relationship.

The setting must be pleasant and relaxing, there will be pictures on the wall, posters and brochures about the services. There will be a kind of sitting room instead of the classic desk-chair solution, indicating the absence of barriers between the two bodies. Nevertheless, all these elements which facilitate the communication do not have to mystify the sense of that moment, as a false and inappropriate situation of friendship. The value of the event, its meaning, the possibility to produce a life change and the need of walking through hard and demanding paths, must be constantly recognized and underlined.

It is necessary to be very rigorous, and to give this moment an unambiguous sense also in terms of time. A time that must be *dedicated* (the helper won't be distracted by other things, such as telephone calls, other people coming, etc., delegating it to

*another colleague who must be always present*), in order to underline the importance of that occasion. *This time is for the woman only*, and maybe it is the first opportunity for the woman to benefit of a moment like this.

*But she is not allowed to embezzle it in an indeterminate way.*

It often happens that the *lack of protocols* let the woman's anxiety lead the interview, she overflows in hours of complaints, which, in a paradoxical way, *forces back the woman within a violent relationship*, because having an uncontrolled relieve to her sufferance has only a temporary *relaxing effect*, but not having an authoritative containment doesn't take her on a reality level, and hamper her trust in the project proposed by the professional helper.

We have to calculate a *maximum duration of the interview* (between 45 and 60 minutes), and to scrupulously monitor the time in order to respect this rule. This means values the time of professional helper as well as the woman, their different and complementary subjectivities and the service itself. Knowing that time is not unlimited will lead the woman to concentrate her exposition on the salient facts, and will help her to welcome the suggestions of the helper and address her interior pain on a reality level, analysing the wholeness of her condition and planning together all the necessary steps from a legal and psycho-social point of view.

Try to systematize the general context of this intervention is a need coming from a deep knowledge about the psycho-emotional status of women victims of violence. They almost never come to the service free from contradictions, complicances and doubts.

We have to consider the *peculiar characteristic of the intra-familial violence*, which is:

*<<...one of the most dangerous denial of human rights, because is perpetrated not from unknown people but from members of the family, people we trust in. It is widespread all over, and produces physical and emotional consequences for women and children endangering their economic safety, mining their self-esteem and their possibility of a normal growth >> (Unicef, 2000).*

The fact of knowing the violent man, having chosen him, having thought he was a lovable person, having believed in his words, represents a delicate knot for the professional helpers who builds the relationship with the woman.

The risk is to victimize/re-victimize the woman, interpreting her story as if consisted only of sufferance, as if the partner has been violent in every single moment of their relationship.

And this is not true, because the violent partner alternates his aggressions with the so called "*false reconciliations*", his abuses with his love offers, and he is able to ask for forgiveness, and deceives the woman giving her all the responsibility to save the relationship. This mighty mechanism is well know in the international literature as "the wheel of power and control" (Walker, 1979).

It has the power to destabilize and confuse the woman. Once arrived at the anti-violence service, she will be torn between the strong and sane drive to self-guard and to escape from that relationship, and a dark and dangerous instinct of remaining involved in it.

She believes that no one can understand her feelings, that her experience is incommunicable, because no one else has ever lived anything like this.

She imagines that, in order to be accepted, she has to provide a standard version of her story, without mentioning any responsibility, any awareness, and proposing and showing herself only as a “victim”.

This attitude will not be useful for her, and will not produce any positive effect but will emphasize her *sense of guilty*: I chose that man, I got wrong, I made a mistake.

The guilty internal voice echoes-back in the “orchestra” of the social perception of the violence against women:

*<<In a relationship focused on arrogance, jealousy, abuses and violence, the maltreatments increase along the years. But this is not enough to let the woman interrupt the relation – in particular when there is cohabitation and children, and, most of all, because she has been taught that love is the most important thing, and love needs to be conquered, kept alive, and fed as a flower.*

*Even when it is a carnivorous plant, that eats you and kills you ... And the same culture tells that he is... like this ... Is intemperate, but at the same time is fragile, lost and needs your help, he is victim of his own violence. And who could rescue him? Only “his” woman, saving and welcoming mother, friend, lover, with her terrible attitude to the holocaust of herself, which is common to all women>> (Gargano, 2003).*

It is important to avoid standardizing her story, taking her escape from violence for granted, trying to tell her what to do, forcing her to dissimulate producing a failing relationship with her.

*Retrace together the reasons* that led her to choose her partner it is important because she can face her sense of guilty, her deep sense of inadequacy that mines her self-esteem and justifies the fact she is prisoner of it, and be helped to *re-build the necessary resources to “free” herself* - by telling and sharing *the shades, the ambiguities, the vacillations inside the relationship and inside herself*, without any worried about a reiterated sentence.

This means that, at the very first moment, even before the so called “taking charge” it is important to send an encouraging message, from a non-judgmental behavior, and leaving her free to express, to talk, to speak about all those shades that, if unexpressed, would choke her. We have to point out that we will not be scandalized, we will not feel nor surprise neither disgust and that we have a firm and unambiguous position against the patriarchal system where we both are plunged in.

Very often, to better understand and make understand the complexity of situations lived by the women victims of violence, I borrow the tale “Bluebeard's wife”. In the tale there is a pretty young girl who give her hand in marriage to a very old man, ugly but very rich. He takes the girl into his 100 room's castle, and he gives her all the keys of the rooms , telling her that she can get into all the rooms apart from one.. Naturally, as soon as he leaves, the girl gets into the forbidden room, and this is the eternal *topos* of the contravention of a prohibition, the transgression, which is also at the source of knowledge. She gets in that room and finds hundreds of bodies of other women killed, hanged by Bluebeard, and she then understands that this is what he has

always done with all his previous wives. Horrified from this sight, she makes the key fall on the floor, and the key get bloody. She is afraid because the blood it is impossible to clean, the husband is coming back, and she is sure he is going to kill her as soon as he get aware that she has been in the room. Likly, her brothers arrive and save her from Bluebeard.

In Clarissa Pinkola Estes's interpretation, in her book "*Women who run with the wolves*" (1994), Bluebeard's wife is the one who "escaped from the predator", who "opened the door of her existence... and saw that carnage, she discovered the assassin of her dreams, of her objectives, her hopes".

I think this could be a good key to share different experiences with the same sense. To lose the possibility of having a project, to give up a dream, is something that everyone experienced, and this awareness is a kind of bridge that help us to reach the person who is seated in front of us, and to build a fruitful relationship with her. Why do I say so? Because very often, the professional helpers tend to be a bit stereotyped, they want to see the woman as a victim, with a sort of bow on her head and a writing on it saying THIS IS A VICTIM, as if someone forced her to get married, forgetting that, even if the relation became violent she had an assertive role and a deep involvement in it.

The woman living with a violent partner, has surely loved a lot that man during her life, and usually she still loves him. Love, what we call love, is not a sort of switch that we can just turn off at any moment, and you must remember, when that women is in front of you that, maybe in a contradictory way, she still loves him. So, to criminalize the man, to depersonalize him defining him only as "the violent man", is self-defeating. Because she, Bluebeard's wife, now is aware that he hides all those killed women in the room, but maybe she thinks that she is not going to end her life like this, and this is, somehow, a kind of resilience for her, a resource. To deny that relationship, describing it merely as an absolute pathology means to deny any authority to the women herself.

In reverse, retracing together with her all the steps of her relation (for example, asking her about some apparently absurd aspects of him such as "is he handsome?" "is he intelligent in your opinion?") means to remind her all those right reasons she had to choose that man, and support her in the reconstruction of her self-esteem that has been unfailingly killed within the violent relationship, so that she feels herself as a stupid, because she didn't have to choose such an awful man, and now, as a dog biting its tail, he tells her that she is stupid, and she believe him. He tells her that she is not able to look after the children, and you have no idea how many women do not split because they are terrorized that they will leave their children, and I am not talking about stupid or untutored women...

In the fairy tales, usually there comes a prince, or a father, or a brother to help a women, but what happens in the real life? Who helps women? The concrete women

ask to be helped by US in order to escape from the castle of violence. And who we are? Who we have to be?

Sometimes, we are the puppets of a ventriloquial society, that speaks using stereotypes, and we talk its same language.

We have to think about it, and monitor this risk. It can happen that we ask ourselves “how could this woman be subjected for 20 years?” or “how such a beautiful woman could marry that kind of man?”. If you think so, even if you don't express it, you give a judgment, and somehow you criminalize her, increasing the distance between you and the woman, closing the door that she was just opening. Sometimes it is really hard to get concentrated on ourselves reactions, also because we are all permeated by the society we live in, and we are all the products of our education. For all these reason is crucial that we keep focused on ourselves, and that we are open to the emotions we receive from the women, and we ask ourselves “what, about the experience of this woman, makes emerge in me without being aware?”

The professional helper never has to underestimate the woman personal experiences. As Clarissa says “the blue beard didn't seemed to be so blue to her”, and this is something regarding the woman only, because we cannot get into her head. What we can do is to retrace the reasons, the feelings, the mutual pact typical of any couple, an unconscious but meaningful pact at an emotional level, and who didn't respect that pact..

Along this path we will really meet the woman, because she won't feel under judgment, and she won't be pushed to dissimulate.

*We need to weigh, to put it in the balance: nostalgia and sense of responsibility/guilt, and that aberrant relationship, that disparity between the moments of “false reconciliation”, and the rest of daily life, being aware that violence against women is a social issue.*

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**Oria Gargano**, Graduated in “Political Sciences” at the University La Sapienza, in Rome, and specialized in “Communication Sciences” at the University LUISS, in Rome. She got a master in “gender studies and equal opportunities” at the University “Alma Mater”.

She is now President of *BeFree Social cooperative against trafficking, violence and discrimination, that she founds in 2007 together with other women*.

*She is Italian expert at the Observatory of Violence Against Women of the European Women Lobby (Bruxelles)*.

She has been director of many anti-violence services in Rome along the years. She is trainer in course and conferences at a National and International level. She is a journalist and writer, author of several different articles and books on these themes.

E-Mail: [oriagargano@libero.it](mailto:oriagargano@libero.it)

**Translated from Italian by the Marta Mearini**