

*Women, Violence and Change:  
the Italian experience of a psychodramatic group  
within the Empower project\**

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***Summary.** The development of the Empower project was achieved through the creation of a group of women that have been victims of violence and their treatment using psycho-dramatic techniques.*

*During six months of treatment it was possible to observe and analyze the roles and the relational dynamics of the women that took part in the project. In particular, it was important to observe how the mother's role within the family in the care and valorisation of positive roles and in support for joining a social role of traditional "woman" is related to the adoption of a denial role of the women's own identity in favour of the fulfilment of a life plan compatible with traditional standards that also includes a violent relationship.*

**Key words:** *Violence against women, psychodrama, tele, mirror, Empower Daphne project*

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## **The Group**

The psychodrama group was created as part of the EMPoWER project. The aim of our group is to support the change modalities in relational, psychological and physical well-being, in addition to measuring spontaneity and creativity levels of the participants. We applied the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) during the development of the activities.

A rather specific goal concerns the observation of factors of co-responsibility in women that have been victims of violence with respect to the history of their condition, and the role that their mothers play in the perpetuation in the cycle of violence and in “teaching” them to bend to the will of men.

A total of eight women took part in the psychodrama group at the Centre Against Violence of Rovigo. All of the participants had in common a gender-based violent experience in which their own partner was the aggressor.

The sessions took place once a week and the duration of the activities was about six months. The group was formed within the first months of the project, with the continuous participation of four women, each of them finding themselves in a different phase of their recovery from a violent situation. This type of group composition contributed to the creation of a group with heterogeneous human resources, though its members had in common experiences of gender-based violence.

Our therapeutic goals included such items as universality and group cohesion (Yalom, 1997).

## **Psychodrama and Change**

At the beginning of the first sessions, the use of various techniques including reflecting each other's situations, activities like sharing their own stories, discussing their difficulties and talking about possible solutions made it possible to build-up confident and supporting telic relations (Moreno, 1975) among the participants.

The fact of being able to introduce themselves in a protected environment guaranteed by the psychodrama methodology favoured the emergence of inner strength roles supported by relevant expectations and the desire for change in their own situation. In each woman these roles highlighted different factors, with a particular emphasis in being resistant to difficulties, but at same time showing the recurrent feature of acquiring the role of resistance: being strong rather than searching for effective strategies.

The acute awareness of their pain led some of the participants to have to go past their violent experiences without sufficient elaboration of their personal experiences and of the emotional consequences related to the experience of being abused. During the sessions the use of oral and body mirrors should be stimulated in order to gradually support the participants in the construction of a broader awareness of themselves and of their interior qualities. Jacob Levi Moreno (1975) states that, every human being is unable to fulfil all his inner roles and that his greatness is always bigger than the one displayed by the things he does (Fonseca, 2012, p.22).

The mirror technique, greatly appreciated by the women's group, produces a mental dynamic through which the woman can see some aspects of herself in the images shaped by other women and reflected back to her (Boria, 2005).

The ability of identifying their own fears and sorrows in other women has brought about a more cohesive atmosphere that gave the participants the possibility of living their own life, and giving form to their own resources and potentialities in a spontaneous and creative way. Participants shared the importance of «finding themselves in others fears», of expressing themselves with the use of body language and rediscovering the ability to care for themselves and their femininity. The women also worked on developing the scripts transmitted from their family of origin and were encouraged to reflect on their own behaviour finding the similarities or differences with their own parents. From those shared considerations, emerged an intrusive mother figure, that is however absent with respect to her daughter's basic needs, and in acknowledging her qualities and desires.

As a result of the session, the women are able to recognize their emergent need for more autonomy and more empowerment (the desire of leaving home, making decisions, fighting for themselves, creating new experiences). Our work with the participants focused on these emergent desires and particularly on the participant's resources to free themselves from a pre-conceived idea of their own life. The fact that they are not considered and appreciated by their parents developed in them the tendency of running away from important and positive things that happened to them and from the individuals that appreciate them. At the end of the therapy sessions, women felt that the «interiorized sense of cohesion» built up and shared in the group will remain as an emotional support in their future life. Some of the women stated that they have gotten back in touch with their femininity and that the intervention has brought them back a sense of freedom.

## Conclusions

The most important goals that participants achieved during the group sessions include: balance, confidence, understanding, and cohesion. These achievements will be very useful in going forward on the path of change, in order to have enough self-confidence and strength to face the hardest moments of their existence.

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