

*Men perpetrators of violence against women:
prevention through educational and therapeutic
interventions*^{*}

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Summary. *We report on the experience of the Association "Circle of men [Cerchio degli Uomini]" that is part of a project in the Province of Turin whose mandate is to identify ways to prevent violence against women in intimate relationships. This project is aimed at male perpetrators or individuals at risk of this type of conduct.*

The intervention is divided into four steps: help-line, individual consultations, group sharing through active methods, and when necessary the client is sent to the social welfare mental health professional. This work encompasses a multidisciplinary perspective and has enabled male perpetrators of violence to gain a greater self-awareness, and an increasing capacity to manage conflicts. Ultimately though this system of violence prevention against women is still in its experimental stages, we can say that so far, it is producing excellent results. Further tests and evaluations will be carried out with an increasing number of cases being treated.

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We report on the experience of the Association "Circle of men" that is part of a project in the Province of Turin aimed at identifying ways to prevent violence against women in intimate relationships.

Preventative interventions are therefore directed to male perpetrators of physical, sexual and psychological violence including stalking or at risk behaviors.

The project began in the spring of 2009 and it is still ongoing. In accordance with the Province of Turin, we set up a telephone call line to provide anonymity to callers, created a website and set up a call center for perpetrators of violence.

We informed the public about the existence of these initiatives through the network of welcome centers for victims of gender violence, ASL Operators, social workers, law enforcement agents, the General Attorney and Attorney for minors, in order to reach out to men with problems related to violence against women.

This service is run by three experts of the Association who have a minimum of four-years training in counseling, with specific training in violence against women, help-lines and supervision as well as regular participation at other seminars, workshops and conferences on the topics of interest.

The intervention is divided into four steps: help-line, individual consultations, group sharing through active methods, and when necessary the client is sent to the social welfare mental health professional. The help-line is led by three counselors and an expert in communications.

In regards to general training, all of the staff have taken a one year special training course with a call help line expert. Therefore when individuals call they can do so in anonymity which encourages the emergence of issues that are often concealed or minimized. In some cases individuals are offered personal orientation interviews.

The orientation interviews can be accessed by men through the call centers or by referral of other network entities. Through the interviews we evaluate the possibility of sending the perpetrator to local services, as well as to participate in a group dedicated to sharing and comparing critical

situations. It is often necessary to increase the number of individual interviews provided in order to get a complete picture and then propose to continue in an adequate way. In some cases, we have only been able to work one-on-one because of the resistance of certain individuals to join a group.

In the group sharing sessions we work with personal stories, experiences and emotions. Therefore one must have a very clear idea of refusing all forms of violence while at the same time accepting that perpetrators of violence are individuals who have the intention of understanding what has happened and want to change. It is necessary to avoid taking a position of moral superiority, to try to teach them what they should do and to avoid power positions which underline the construction of violent behavior, as well as the insecurity and fear that often hide these behaviors (Ciccione, 2009).

Therefore the operators must maintain a delicate balance to avoid on the one hand dangerous confluences and on the other hand harmful prejudices. The feedback from the participants of the group should cover only the personal experiences and it is desirable to suspend all judgment. In the groups we also use active methods, such as activation techniques, role playing, the use of films and lectures and autobiographical writing. This process facilitates the expression and recognition of emotional experiences, especially of anger and fear and techniques related to their control and handling.

Some specific topics are brought up directly by the group leaders such as: minimization, denial, projection, recognition and deification of women, empathy towards the victim, the signs of escalating anger and violence, the way towards change and values and the system of life (Merzagora Betsos, 2009). During the last three years, we have completed about 250 separate actions including telephone calls, personal interviews and led groups for men with critical issues and violent relationships.

It has been fundamental to have created a network with local services and institutions to carry out interventions at various levels in order to face specific critical cases, as well as in working with professional figures and legal entities to assist the victims and institutional agencies.

The issue of violence affects millions of men, only in a few cases we can speak of true pathology, most often, what emerges are some clinical features, but most of the time the problem starts from a widespread patriarchal and macho culture, and of personal past experiences that have caused a devaluing of oneself and of the other.

It has therefore been necessary to have a strong team, working in unison as indicated by the guidelines of the European Communities and referred to

as the multidisciplinary approach, that characterizes the issue of violence in intimate relationships, especially in cases where there are many factors related to cultural and personal history.

This multidisciplinary perspective has led male perpetrators of violence, to a greater self-awareness, with an increasing capacity to manage conflicts, emotions and to develop empathy in relationships. In many cases, the perpetrators of violence made a profound change in their perception of themselves and others.

As reported by the European centers, there is a high risk of recidivism in the medium and long term (Baldry & Roia, 2011). Men who have been integrated into our groups have not committed acts of violence while attending the group. Moreover, we believe that the time necessary to produce a profound change is more than six months/one year, for this type of group work.

We are therefore considering the possibility of providing a support service through which periodically the men who have already completed the course, can be monitored and periodically attend our regular groups on gender issues. Ultimately the creation of a violence prevention program that is still in its experimental stages, has produced excellent results. Further tests and evaluations will be carried out and an increasing number of cases treated.

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¹ The Court of Appeal has authorised the First National Plan against gender violence and stalking edited by the Department of Equal Opportunities, February 2011