

## *UMAR: Objectives and methodology used by the multidisciplinary team in interventions with victims of gender violence\**

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**Summary.** *Violence against women is still a current problem in Portuguese Society. It was only in the early 1980s that Portugal recognized domestic violence as a social problem and only in 1999 that social policy created answers for women who are victims of this type of violence (Portugal, Conselho de Ministros, 1999). In 2011, there was a total of 27 women killed in the context of marital and intimate relationships and 44 attempted murders of women. (OMA, 2011). Society as a whole needs to become aware of this epidemic and work towards its elimination and zero tolerance towards any type of violence. In this paper we will discuss and present the role of UMAR (Non Governmental Organization, in defense of women's rights), provide a description of the P'RA TI Center and discuss methods and operational strategies used in intervention with victims.*

**Key words:** *gender violence, feminist-ecological model, intervention, UMAR*

### **UMAR and P'RA TI – working with women victims of violence**

UMAR – União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (The Union of Women and Alternative Response) is a women's association that was

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formed on 12 September 1976 as an a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with public utility status.

As a result of the Revolution of the 25th of April, 1974 (democratic government formation), there was the need to change women's social status, and develop woman rights issues.

UMAR is a Feminist organization. By knowing the reality and the urgency of this concept in a patriarchal society in which we live in, we strive in trying to comply and respond to as many discriminatory events as possible.

UMAR sees the phenomenon of domestic violence within intimate relationships in a socio-cultural perspective, explaining domestic violence through social structures and cultural values that legitimize the control and domination over women, analyzing the historical factors (patriarchal society that oppresses women and tolerates the use of violence against them), social, cultural and political factors that contribute to the mistreatment of women, as a result of their invisibility and their devaluation, in the context of a patriarchal society.

In a more practical area, UMAR handles direct interventions with abused women. Managing two shelters and two Service Centers, that are inserted in the Portuguese network of Public House Shelter for Women Victims of Domestic Violence; P'RA TI is one of these Service Centers.

Projects and program intervention, with strategic public, especially children and youth are also a concern of UMAR. As a result the institute operates a program of violence prevention.

UMAR prepares and participates in various studies of the phenomenon of violence against women such as analyzing the base work carried out by women's NGO's, relative to marital feminine homicide, in this case through the Observatory of Murdered Women.

In 2009 the Oporto Women's Centre – P'RA TI was established to attend, support and accompany women victims of violence. P'RA TI aims to provide battered women with a safe space that ensures care, support, monitoring and specialist consulting, with the objective of insuring protection and empowerment for the victims.

The Center also provides follow-up psychotherapy to women, by contributing to an internal change and thus helping prevent new cases of violence. Through legal advice, we enable the conditions to help women experiencing domestic violence to implement their project in real life situations, taking into account all its difficulties, while supporting and counseling the woman to find their own answers. This is achieved by enabling all their qualities and skills, finding and developing their own way of life. For example,: obtaining their own financial independence, finding

their autonomy and citizenship and contributing to the enforcement of equal opportunities between women and men.

### **Methods and operational strategies in the P'RA TI intervention with victims**

P'RA TI intervenes according to the Feminist Ecological Model (Warren, 1994; Izquierdo, 2007) in defending the feminist view that " violence stems from the unequal distribution of power between the sexes in our society, being used by men to exercise dominion and control over women keeping them in a subordinate position" (Yllo, 2005, Marin & Russo, 1999 cit. in Machado & Dias, 2010), conceiving it as a phenomenon of "genderized nature" (ibid.).

The ecological model applied to gender violence has been studied in the ecological framework for intimate partner violence (Heise, 1998; Chaulk & King, 1998) and it defends the existence of four integrated levels/contexts that explain the violence towards women: macro-system - (societal level), exo-system (community level), micro-system (family and relationship) and finally endo-system (individual level).

The intervention with victims of violence involves two key issues: the security and impact of the abuse. In this sense, the evaluation and support for the victim, involving a watchful eye and a constant technical team, with a logical follow-up and not just a one-moment service. This has been a concern of UMAR, working in close proximity to the victim.

In order to assist women in regaining their freedom and autonomy, P'RA TI offers an integrated service to support women at a various levels: legal, psychological, social and provides professional guidance, to support women in building their (new) life project.

The Attendance Center seeks a multidisciplinary approach, paying attention to various procedures corresponding to each situation. At an early stage, victims or the general public can reach us via telephone, through a professional, referral, the media or friends/family referral. Further on, the victims are received personally by a general reception that provides a screening service that evaluates the risks that such users are subjected to, as well as evaluate the woman' needs and will.

This risk evaluation helps to reorganize the staff team with the objective of avoiding an overcrowding.

After screening, the victims are forwarded to the various sections of the center, including:

- *legal services*. Counseling the victim's on their rights and duties, provide guidance and help in applying for legal aid, file criminal complaints, divorces, etc.;
- *psychological care*. Relational functioning is a catalyst for restructuring personal healing and restructuring; Allowing the user to experience a continuity, in order to enable the internal transformation, creating a new relational model (nonviolent) identification; Supporting the restructuring of the victims' personal life in an everyday specific requirement. Finding alternative solutions for the day-to-day problems;
- *social care*. Establishing a balanced plan considering the existing resources in state social security; Making and providing the necessary contacts with social partners;
- *monitoring and professional guidance*: active help in the empowerment of professional skills, development of curriculum vitae, cover letters, available job applications, preparation for possible job interviews, etc.

Being able to accomplish an autonomy project for each woman victim of domestic violence, is to ensure her safety, assure dignified living conditions and provide a fair lifestyle, as well as the redefinition of personal and emotional terms. This process can only be done in stages, establishing priorities, according to the needs and will of the woman who needs help. This is possible by the dedication and understanding of the qualified staff working together on a project of functional, social and autonomy change.

The goals and objectives of the intervention with victims of gender violence are the following:

- helping women to establish a relationship of trust, and to be able to evaluate individual and institutional history of violence, risk limits and personal opportunities, as well as their social and family resources;
- talking to the victim about their different options in dealing with the problems they are experiencing, guaranteeing confidentiality, the right of choice, strengthening their self-esteem and autonomy;
- establishing gradual, concrete, realistic steps, towards building a map of resources, options and actions in order to implement the methodology;
- support and monitor the users who want to proceed with criminal complaints to the competent authorities, medical examinations and, if necessary, removal of personal belongings from their homes;
- alerting the various entities, judicial, social services, shelters, through reports and direct contact;
- encourage the construction of connections with the various sources of assistance, protection and monitoring, strengthening a personal

organization, based on a support network (neighbors, social location, schools, family health center, job center).

In this process, the central role of the support network is fundamental, both formal and informal, in the recovery of the victim. Besides the P'RA TI Center, this support is often unavailable, as is emotional and family backup, aggravated by the still weak network of services for the treatment or monitoring of victims of gender violence. Studies in Portugal assert that in spite of the actual service resources, there is still a lack of entities articulation (Magalhães 2012). Thus emerges the importance of working together and coordinating the different types of responses for supporting, protecting and reassuring the victims. The networking capabilities permit the following conditions: taking advantage of the expertise of each organization and its users, sharing information and knowledge, finding synergies, having a greater awareness of ones constraints and potential, knowledge exchange of available resources, provide locations, common objectives, mobilization of resources, and evaluating and making a diagnosis, taking into account the specificities of each institution and existing resources.

## **Conclusion**

Domestic violence is a phenomenon that has always existed, and is not just a fact of modern times. However, it was not until the early 1980s, that Portugal recognized domestic violence as a social problem (Portugal, Conselho de Ministros, 1999), and only after that date, this phenomenon was addressed by health professionals, and by legal and social workers.

There were three main factors that have contributed to the visibility of domestic violence in Portugal: feminist movements, changes in legislation and a gradual change in the perception of constitutes or not violent behavior.

We have reason to believe that this does not mean that domestic violence has increased in our country, but it's visibility has increased..

The reflection and debate on this issue is essential in Portuguese society, it is necessary that a thorough review be conducted on the issue of domestic violence and in particular of violence against women in intimate relationships. However, there is still a long way to go. It is also important to consider the role of professionals, organizations and institutions, public or private, through which women victims can get help. Indeed, this issue represents an immeasurable loss not only to the victims but also to our

society, because it is a process of collective victimization. For example these cases can be a source of violence and many other social problems such as sick women, women in prison, women killed, orphaned and neglected children and dysfunctional families.

The fight against the scourge of this phenomenon can only be successful when understood and fought as a whole, taking into account the necessary legislative changes, educational policies, social policies and reintegration policies for employment and vocational training policies health, or support for family planning. It would be essential to improve fundamental knowledge sharing and work between the Courts, the Service Centers (including UMAR), the law enforcement agencies, hospitals and health centers, Social Action, the Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People and so on.

Another important aspect is to know the way it works in combating this phenomenon. Obviously intra individual factors, including a person's psychological nature, is very important, but one cannot ignore the inter individual factors and the social, economic and cultural rights of women who come to support services for victims, since the interaction between these factors determines often their victimization trajectories. The intervention on victims should therefore not only be based on a model of individual intervention but also a form of social intervention.

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