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Defusing gender-based violence. A center reserved to men perpetrators of violence

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Abstract

The paper explores gender-based violence to identify practices to counter the phenomenon through the analysis of a case study: the Center for Authors of Violence. Initially, the socio-cultural context is analyzed in all its complexity. Men who commit acts of violence are conditioned by the logic of male domination exercised in a patriarchal context, in which violence is a manifestation of power. Subsequently, the peculiarities of the case study and the detection techniques used are illustrated. The information obtained is then analyzed to highlight critical issues of the mission and processes activated for the implementation of the project. In conclusion, some useful considerations for the design and implementation of similar services are highlighted, emphasizing the importance of prevention and training measures to combat the phenomenon.

Keywords: perpetrators violence; Responsible Men Project; violence; change

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of gender-based violence is pervasive in society. It expresses itself in hugely heterogeneous episodes and takes different forms as revenge porn in virtual space (Bassi and Della Putta 2024) or the most diverse forms of physical violence (Walby and Towers 2017). The Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe 2011), ratified by Italy in 2013 (Law No. 77 of 2013), recognizes violence as a structural problem rooted in inequality between women and men, which prevents women from totally free and equal lives (Praticò 2021). Gender-based violence emerges in any act «that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life» (Yanyi and Sitawa 2015: XII).

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In this historical period, the sources of violence against women seem to multiply. Lifestyles inspired by hegemonic masculinity (Connel 1995) lose their legitimacy, and a section of men lose their orientation in the management of affective relationships since different narratives, such as feminist and Queer theories (Butler 1990), overlap with the narrative of male domination (Bourdieu 2014). This field becomes fertile for the growth of gender violence, which becomes not only a power issue (as the superiority of one gender over the other) but a cultural issue (like the inability to manage the relationship).

The paper focuses on the possibilities of defusing gender-based violence by working on the perpetrators of violence; in the Istanbul Convention, Article 16, devoted to *Preventive and Therapeutic Intervention Programs*, calls for all necessary measures, including legislation, to support programs and interventions aimed at perpetrators of domestic violence. In Italy the Law No. 69 of 2019: "Measures concerning domestic and gender violence", also known as the "Codice Rosso" (Red Code) provides individuals convicted of violent crimes with the opportunity to participate in rehabilitation programs to suspend their sentence potentially (Peroni 2019). After describing the phenomena of violence emerging as a result of power and cultural change, this study starts from the description of a center that works on *male perpetrators of violence*¹. In particular, the research explores the structuring and implementation of a project. The findings show that to reduce gender-based violence, it is important to promote a network model that values an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

2. Violence: an expression of power and cultural change. A theoretical framework

The actions of the feminist movements against social inequalities and the separation of gender roles, the imposition of normative models, misogyny, and machismo have also had the merit of raising the issue of gender violence (Knoblock 2008).

The forms of violence in the plurality of its definitions, from intimate violence and domestic violence to gender-based violence (Gianturco and Brancato 2022), show a climate of high conflict. Men who fear losing their dominant positions act indirectly and subtly or directly and aggressively to repress the emancipatory process emerging from affective and emotional relationships.

This change does not occur with a simple and linear path but within a radical and traumatic upheaval because the different approach implies a replacement of the cultural approaches that people use to orient themselves in the world. Indeed, a process of transformation of the *weltanschauung*, as stated by Karl Mannheim (1991), implies an encounter/clash between ideologies, which justify the existing social system, and utopias, which propose new interpretations. Within such a transition, we can place the flanking and overlapping of cultures inspired by male dominance and hegemonic masculinity - on the one hand - and feminist and queer emancipatory theories on the other.

¹ The Centers for Men Who Commit Gender-Based Violence (hereafter CUAV) are specialized facilities that provide intervention programs for men who have perpetrated domestic, sexual, or gender-based violence. These programs aim to facilitate behavioral change and prevent recidivism by promoting respectful and non-violent relationships (Conferenza Stato-Regioni 2022).

Today, the narratives of the feminist and queer movements (Buttler 1990) are coming alongside the mainstream ideology. Male domination, which has exercised a widespread and undisputed power for centuries, was able to impose categorization and construct subjectivities that uncritically respected its discipline (Foucault 1972). Symbolic forms of violence (Bourdieu 2000) that legitimize male power and relegate women to a subordinate role within social and cultural structures are less recognized and accepted by society. The increased women's freedom and independence of women leave a portion of the male population unprepared.

Within this framework, relationships between individuals and sentimental relationships between women and men experience a repositioning of the balance of power. Male identity figures are more directly affected by this. In addition to the violence that originates from the ancient and, unfortunately, never-ending affirmation of power, other forms emerge that are fueled by a disorientation of male figures. The process of socialization that transmits the forms of hegemonic masculinity ends up disabling men from sentimental relationships. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe, in fact, hegemonic masculinity with specific dimensions: physical prowess, economic success, heteronormativity, the devaluation of feminine attributes, the suppressing emotions to show strength and stoicism. The combination of all these characteristics can lead to toxic practices. When they emerge within the dynamics of a couple, the relationship becomes unacceptable for women who have experienced an emancipatory process.

In this contest social and cultural work with perpetrators of violence is essential to break the cycle of violence, to promote responsibility and to propose life alternatives. At the same time, to prevent the dangers of reoffending, programs for perpetrators of violence must prioritize the safety of the partners and children involved at all levels to avoid the risk of reproducing violent dynamics in future relationships (Babcock et al. 2016). To this purpose, initiatives have been started at international and national level: the European Network for Working with Domestic Violence Perpetrators (OAK Foundation 2021), founded in 2014 as part of the European Daphne project, that aims to define shared operational practices, assessment tools and standards while strengthening collaboration with institutions (Fritz, 2023); RELIVE (Relationships Free of Violence) is a network that acts at the national level and, like the European one, connects civil society realities, organizations and institutions (Demurtas e Peroni, 2021).

A national survey conducted by the Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies, 94 centers were mapped. Data from indicate a further rise in access: 4.502 men contacted the centers. However, not all of them proceeded to initiate a support program (Regione Toscana 2025). The results highlight the existence of a demand that the system is not yet able to fully meet. It should be noted that aggressive and violent behavior escalates in 85% of cases without intervention, and it is rare for perpetrators of domestic violence to regain control after an initial episode of violence without external support (Observatory on Violence against Women 2022).

The paper proposes to highlight the overlapping of the sources of violence related to the maintenance of power and how counteracting and preventive actions can translate into practice through the observation of a case study.

3. The case study: methods and data collection

The research focuses on a case study. The information, which forms the basis of the analysis, was collected in two stages: the first was through participant observation, and the second was interviews conducted through key informants selected for their role in the organization.

Choosing a case study allows us to understand the processes and actions of the social actors involved in the observed phenomenon (Harrison 2017). In this way, it is also possible to better understand the findings that emerge in the analysis (Merriam 2009). Inside a relational approach the perspective addresses the male dimension without neglecting the female experience (Bozzoli et al., 2013); instead of “abusers” or “violent man” it’s preferable to use the concept of “male perpetrators of violence” (hereafter MPV) that reflects the chance to promote cultural change in the fight against gender-based violence to act on the responsibility of the abusive subjects, in accordance to the report of *Senato della Repubblica* that suggests adopting the expression: “men who commit violence”. This choice would emphasize an approach that underlines how violent behavior is not innate and can be changed. As the report states, without direct intervention on the behavior and cultural norms of perpetrators, a comprehensive response to violence against women is not possible (Senato della Repubblica, 2022). The aim is to take responsibility by overcoming denial and reconstructing an identity to overcome stigmatization.

The case study involved the anti-violence center of Carrara, which carries out activities through an organized reality of civil society, the Italian Women's Center. It is partner of a network of Third Sector Organizations, local administration, and police institutions. Also, the center has chosen to join the Zeus project since 2022, which provides interventions to work on MPV (Cuciti and Crapanzano, 2024). The focus is on the *Project Responsible Men* developed to fight gender-based violence, with a particular focus on male dynamics and perspectives. Its objective is to prevent and counteract gender-based violence by encouraging perpetrators of violent behavior to take responsibility.

Three criteria lead the choice of this center. *accessibility*: the center involved supported the research project, ensuring access to both data and operational contexts; *cultural and social background*: the Carrara area enabled the exploration of territorial specificities in the management and delivery of services for perpetrators of violence; *exemplarity criterion*: the case was considered illustrative due to its specific operational features and the effective collaboration among the various actors within the anti-violence network. This aspect proved particularly relevant for observing the inter-institutional dynamics that characterize work with MPV.

The research was carried out in the period 2023–2024. Participant observation and interviews were conducted in October 2023, while communication with the relevant institutions continued throughout 2024 to gather further clarification and to monitor ongoing developments.

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews are the two techniques of social research used. The first aims to identify professional methods and to analyze the rehabilitation process and the of the operators. The focus was on the project aimed at MPV men, among other activities at the center. Three issues guided the collection of information:

1. Observation of the methodologies, tools, and strategies used by the center
2. Analysis of collaborative actions with other local entities to combat and prevent violence against women
3. Participation in teamwork to identify obstacles and emerging resources.

The semi-structured interviews with four key informants (see Table no.1) aims to gain a deeper understanding of the actions and the processes activated by the center.

Table no. 1. Key informants

Key informant	Gender	Age	Educational degree	Activity
1	female	39	PhD	Coordinator of the anti-violence center
2	male	64	High school degree	Coordinator of the Responsible Men project (volunteer)
3	female	54	Bachelor's degree	Social Worker
4	female	78	PhD	President of the Association (CIF)

Each interview, adapted to the specific role of the key informant, is structured around four topics: 1. Organization and structure of the center's processes and how they have adapted to the needs; 2. Techniques and strategies for supporting victims; 3. Structuring the project on MPV, the methods of prevention, and contrast; 4. Importance of the network of services.

The triangulation of the results obtained from the two detection techniques allows a comparison between the issues observed by the qualitative investigation (Maxwell 2013). The researcher engages with the vital world in which the phenomenon develops through participant observation, with which the relationships between the actors and their choices are better understood, the researcher empathizes with them, and the knowledge of their actions is improved (Quarta 2020). Interviews allow for the in-depth study of specific topics and issues about the research theme. Structured phases within a survey strategy conduct the dialogue between researcher and respondent (Bichi 2005) to allow the boundaries of the topics studied to widen and to describe their complexity (Corrao 2005).

4. The interviewees: a difficult mission

The interviews reveal, on the one hand, an awareness of the mission of the project analyzed, often perceived as distinctive compared to a traditional CAV, and, on the other hand, the complexity of implementing the service provided.

«According to the Law, the service provides two modes of access»², as the interviewees declare: the first mode concerns perpetrators of violence reported through Code Red (Law no. 69 of 2019), who can only receive a suspension of their sentence by participating in organized programs (Cannito and Torrioni, 2023). The courts, UEPE offices, or lawyers compel the MPV. The second mode of access is voluntary: they are welcome to understand their needs, analyze their condition to face them, and provide the necessary support.

² Key informant no. 4: f. 78, PhD, President of Association.

Data of the Center show the number of citizens in the rehabilitation programs designed to promote behavioral change are activated in two different ways, in the last two years: in the first case, the court compels the MPV to the Centre (compelled in the tab. no. 2); in the second case, the MPV decides to contact the Centre voluntarily (volunteer in the tab. no 2).

Table no. 2 – Access at the project MPV

Year	Italian compelled	no Italian compelled	Total compelled	Italian volunteer	No Italian volunteer	Total volunteer	Total MPV
2023	15	4	19	9	5	14	33
2024	30	4	34	9	3	12	46

Source: Project Responsible Men Carrara 2025

The increase in the number of people accessing the service indicated in the table shows a growth in demand. As the center's President also comments during the interview: «the data highlights how violent behavior is perceived more by Italians than by foreigners»³. Above all, the data shows an increase in access due to court requests. This is an indicator that highlights both the trust that other institutions have in the service offered and the lower incidence of voluntary access. The latter requires a commitment to greater training and information efforts.

Zeus Protocol, for interviewers, represents a tool to identify risk situations and to prevent the escalation of violent behaviors. The protocol is an agreement between the Anti-Crime Division of the Police and the center to raise awareness of the social damage and negative impact of aggressive and violent actions to prevent recidivism. In this regard, the head of the Responsible Men project explains during the interview:

The Zeus Protocol represents a non-criminal approach to addressing the issue of violence. Many individuals may be reluctant to report to their partners but still wish for the violence to stop. Through its discussions and administrative interventions, the Zeus Protocol has proven effective in preventing numerous instances of violence. It is also important to note that many individuals may not be aware that their behavior could result in criminal charges⁴.

This procedure can be applied when someone is reported for violent behavior, but his situation is not yet clear. The police service invites the individual to contact the center to engage in a free program to address problematic behaviors, such as anger management. This rapid and integrated intervention aligns with the best practices recommended by the Istanbul Convention, providing a comprehensive response to address the complex issue of gender-based violence (Garbarino and Giulini, 2019).

The screening process for perpetrators of violence is conducted according to the admission criteria established by the Cener. Following individual assessment interviews, if

³ Key informant no. 4: f. 78, PhD, President of Association.

⁴ Key informant no. 3: m. 64, High school degree, Coordinator of the Responsible Men project.

the individual does not demonstrate an adequate level of awareness or willingness to engage, the process is discontinued. As noted by coordinator of *Responsible Men project*, «referrals to external services typically occur in cases involving significant mental health conditions, psychiatric disorders, or substance dependency»⁵. This approach aligns with the findings of the Tuscany Report, which indicates that such conditions constitute exclusion criteria in 74% of CUAVs at the national level (Regione Toscana 2025).

As one interviewee states, the aim of the project is first to change the perception of the violent action perpetrated and then to initiate a change in the participant:

The first five individual meetings aim to modify the participants' perceptions. We want to show the intention to offer support, not to judge. By the second cycle of meetings, we begin to observe the early stages of change in the participants.

The areas of origin of the perpetrators of violence involved in the project include Massa, Carrara, Lucca, and the surrounding municipalities. A team of psychologists and psychotherapists with solid experience in the field manage the service of the center. In addition, the service also provides legal support through the office of a lawyer.

The network's work has been made possible through shared training. In this regard the coordinator of the anti-violence center, states:

We have provided training for several professional groups, including law enforcement officers and magistrates. [...] This exchange of perspectives has proven to be highly formative, significantly enhancing our understanding of the issue. It has allowed us to identify solutions and explore new approaches beyond our specific areas of expertise. We are firmly convinced that collaboration and training with external professionals are crucial for raising awareness of gender-based violence and developing more effective strategies to address it.⁶

A synergistic network approach is essential to provide a punctual and integrated response in the treatment of perpetrators of violence. In this regard, a social worker emphasizes that:

A shared commitment to developing a common language between different professions facilitates collaboration. We recognized the legitimacy of each role and worked together toward a common goal. While each of us has our institutional responsibilities, mutual recognition of this legitimacy has been crucial for delivering an integrated response⁷.

Collaboration between the Project for Abusive Males and the Anti-Violence Center is crucial. The operator maintains ongoing contact with the partners of the individuals involved, ensuring direct and continuous support. Additionally, the two organizations

⁵ Key informant no. 3: m. 64, High school degree, Coordinator of the Responsible Men project.

⁶ Key informant no. 1: f.39, PhD, Coordinator of the anti-violence center.

⁷ Key informant no. 2: f. 54, bachelor's degree, Social Worker.

collaborate to conduct awareness campaigns and promote a coordinated response in the Carrara area.

Prevention is another theme that emerges from interviews. It is crucial to recognize that gender-based violence is deeply rooted in cultural norms and values, which shape how violence is understood and addressed. President association affirms:

Gender-based violence is a facet of a broader problem of widespread violence. Many people use it to resolve conflicts at various levels. [...] It is crucial to place the issue of gender-based violence within a broader cultural discourse aimed at promoting change that promotes equality and respect.⁸

Male violence against women is a social issue stemming from a system of values that both men and women internalize from childhood. The center proposes an integrated primary prevention response in collaboration with the project. The coordinator of the anti-violence center reports that:

We have conducted awareness campaigns through training activities in schools. We propose moments of reflection and spaces for discussion. Our goals are to raise awareness about gender perception and promote a culture of respect, both in the school environment and in society. We also aim to increase awareness of the available services.⁹

While awareness campaigns focus on primary prevention, perpetrator programs are a form of secondary prevention. This distinction highlights that prevention efforts are complementary at different stages of the process, from raising awareness in schools to offering interventions for those who have already adopted violent behaviors.

5. Participant observation: the project implementation

Observation within the center highlights how methods and strategies are employed in the Responsible Man project. The program for MPV includes two phases. The first phase, *assessment of suitability for intervention*, involves individual interviews, group sessions, and a one-on-one feedback session to assess participants' motivation and compatibility with the program. If participants are deemed eligible, they advance to the second phase, *re-education intervention*, which involves led-by-experts group sessions. Group sessions take place for at least 6 months, and each meeting lasts approximately 1 hour and half.

Each meeting is devoted to a specific topic, offering participants a safe and welcoming environment in which to share their thoughts, if they wish, without any pressure. Participants also receive documents containing questions and reflections on the topics covered. Group coordinators describe it as stimulating new ways of seeing reality. The method prioritizes the development of skills to recognize and manage the emotions that drive anger and

⁸ Key informant no.4: f. 78, PhD, President of Association.

⁹ Key informant no. 1: f. 39, PhD, Coordinator of the anti-violence center.

aggression, thereby reducing the risk of recidivism and preventing the escalation of violent acts.

Professionals, involved in the case study, use the IMPACT Toolkit (2025) to measure and monitor changes in the MVP's behavior. The tool proposes five questionnaires that evaluate aspects such as behavioral change, safety, well-being, responsibility and impact on children. In the early stages of the process, behavioral checklists help men identify actions that they had not previously recognized as abusive. In later stages, the questionnaires measure the MVP's commitment to change and their motivations. The toolkit also includes questionnaires to be administered to victims (partners or ex-partners) at different stages of the rehabilitation process. For victims or survivors, the questionnaires also encourage reflection on their own wellbeing and situation. Their participation is essential to fully understand the changes and their impact on family dynamics (Hester et al. 2014).

To inform the woman about the progress made by the perpetrator of the violence and the support services available to her, while fully respecting her right to refuse. As the experience of the CAM in Florence also shows, this practice is also a valuable tool for both assessment and ongoing monitoring, especially when the woman is already receiving assistance from anti-violence centers or social services (Cannito and Torrioni, 2023).

Observation of the methodologies applied in the rehabilitation process also reveals a focus on new tools such as the introduction of the S.A.R.A. method (2), which is already being tested. This tool collects specific information from the person at risk and is used to assess the degree of risk to the victim, classifying the risk of danger posed by the perpetrator of the violence. This method helps to determine the priority of the interventions necessary to ensure the victim's safety (Baldry 2016).

The intervention works preventively through group discussion forums, which are particularly effective in promoting change and encouraging reflection on the relational methods used. These proposals aim to recognize emotions and encourage participants to share their feelings. The work proposed in the group aims to explore and address topics such as gender stereotypes, anger and emotion management, goal setting, responsibility, parenting and emotional alphabetization.

Participant observation allowed us to observe some of the critical issues faced by operators. One of the main concerns relates to the costs of the program, which hinder men with limited financial means and therefore create economic inequality. Participation is free for those who enter voluntarily or after being formally warned, while those admitted under Law no. 69 of 2019 (the Red Code) are required to contribute financially. A second difficulty is the fact that the professionals participating in the project work entirely free of charge. This could affect the sustainability and functioning of the center. Finally, it is very important to improve the conditions of the facilities and premises that house the center in order to create a welcoming environment that affects the quality of well-being of all those involved in the project.

6.Discussion

The description of the results shows that the Responsible Man project takes the ecological model into consideration. It allows social workers and scholars to consider violence in intimate relationships as the result of an interaction between various cultural, social and psychological factors (Hester and Lilley 2014, Pauncz 2016). This approach

considers the individual as part of a complex network of relationships, structured in concentric layers corresponding to key developmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Individual behavior is the result of the interaction of these overlapping systems. Interpersonal relationships, including family, friends and partners (micro level), can increase this risk, particularly when individuals are constantly exposed to interactions with potential aggressors or negative peer influences. The community (meso level) highlights the role of environments, such as neighborhoods and schools, where marginalization or social isolation can foster violence (Smith et al. 2014). Finally, social factors, cultural attitudes, and social inequalities (macro level) significantly influence the acceptance of violence and contribute to its perpetuation. All these levels underscore the complex interactions between individual, relational, and community factors, highlighting the need for integrated and comprehensive strategies to address violence (Dalhberg and Krug, 2002).

Although the ecological model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that fuel harmful behaviors, it is equally important to consider how relational and emotional deficiencies influence the attitudes of MPVs. Furthermore, the emotional difficulties experienced by perpetrators of violence, as described by the interviewed coordinator of the Responsible Men project, help to understand the deficit in the affective domain, which manifests itself in difficulty managing emotions and an inability to adopt appropriate coping strategies when faced with stressful events. This emotional void complicates the perpetrator's ability to recognize and regulate their impulses, further exacerbating their inability to form healthy and respectful relationships.

The program aims to raise awareness among men about the implications of masculinity, particularly on their links to violence and patriarchal structures. It also encourages reflection on relationship models and parenting roles, advocating for a change in the patterns of power and control associated with masculinity that perpetuates female subordination.

Grifoni (2016) notes that perpetrators of violence manifested primarily an inability to communicate their needs and engage in reciprocal interactions. This breakdown in communication leads to aggression and dominance in their relational patterns, reflecting a fundamental difficulty in establishing relationships based on cooperation and true intimacy. Such harmful behaviors are not isolated acts but serve as mechanisms to maintain control, stemming from a lack of emotional and relational skills. Over time, these actions are continually constructed and perpetuated as an attempt to exert power and dominance over others. The violent act is also a choice rooted in the refusal to confront one's vulnerabilities. It emerges as a dysfunctional response to problems and a misguided attempt to ascribe meaning to events within intimate relationships. In this context, these violent actions serve as an illusion to control and dominate power dynamics and manage the unpredictability of life (Ciccone 2017).

Working with men who perpetrate violence involves a balance between prevention and protection. However, it should be considered a preventative measure, even if violence has occurred already. In such instances, the intervention seeks to prevent reoffending. Prevention, therefore, takes on different forms depending on the time frame addressed, distinguishing between short-term and long-term prevention (Observatory on Violence against Women 2022).

7. Conclusion

The case study does not allow for generalizations regarding the phenomenon studied, both due to the exceptional nature of the context in which it is situated and the uniqueness of the experience. However, some points of interest regarding the design of CUAV services can be highlighted.

Analysis of the results of the interviews and participant observation offers three suggestions. Firstly, there is a need to set up a service within a local network that can support the work of the Center. Coordination between stakeholders is extremely important to bring about a change in the cultural models that influence MPVs. Furthermore, there is a request for the various internal and external professionals involved in the project to participate in joint training experiences to improve the synergy of the network. Secondly, during rehabilitation, particular attention is paid to victims who should assume – in safe conditions – the role of “pseudo” external consultants to prevent any future acts of violence. Thirdly, as often stated by the interviewees, educational and informational activities are essential to help people, including MPVs, recognize the early signs of aggression, so that rehabilitation programs can be activated preventively.

The study highlights a comprehensive and integrated approach in combating gender-based violence (Brancato and Gianturco 2022). The role of the networks in a local context reflects a strong awareness of the problem involving various institutional actors who designed collaborative initiatives to promote cultural change. This integrated approach highlights the importance of collective action in effectively addressing the problem. For service design, therefore, it remains effective to adopt an ecological model capable of bringing together the various levels of intervention, not only to intervene in the rehabilitation of MPVs, but also to promote preventive actions.

Authors contributions

The authors share the structure of the article and the content; however, Andrea Casavecchia wrote the parr. 2. 3. 6., Margherita Di Stefano wrote the parr. 4. 5. parr. 1 and 7 were written together.

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