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# Psychological violence and intra-family moral abuse: dynamic profiles of deviance. An Italian retrospective

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## Abstract

The work deals with the delicate problem of psychological intra-family violence and the consequent moral and psychological abuse that is reflected on the vulnerable victims of ill-treatment, who turn out to be mainly women and children. Therefore, particular attention was paid to the causes that explain the phenomenology of ill-treatment in the family and the effects that manifest themselves on the victims and their family and social relationships. The phenomenon of physical and sexual violence is frequently discussed, although, on the contrary, less attention is paid to psychological violence, which is an emerging crime in today's society and very widespread, especially among women, the protagonists of the victimisation process. It should be remembered that violence is generally not just about beatings; psychological violence is invisible, difficult to perceive because it has no obvious signs, but the effects it produces are destructive. Psychological violence is part of “gender-based violence”, an expression that indicates the set of violence of various kinds perpetrated by men against women as women.

**Keywords:** *Violence; Society; Crimes; Family; Moral abuse; Deviance.*

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## 1. Introduction

Violence against women is a long-standing social problem that attracted the attention of scholars especially towards the end of the 1960s. Until then, violence against women was treated as a private matter between the members of the violent dynamic and the men perpetrators of violence were considered mentally unstable, thus justifying their actions (Bourdieu 2009); moreover, it was represented that the cause of violence was the response to a provocative act of women who were considered “different” than those who did not suffer violence and were therefore considered “normal”. Gender-based violence is rooted in sexist and patriarchal culture (Boca et. al. 2017). Sexism is the tendency to evaluate people on the basis of their gender: in the case of misogyny, men are seen as being superior to women, so society was presented as being hierarchically ordered, as if

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there were first-class human beings (men) and second-class human beings (women). The social system in which patriarchy prevailed was typical of the mediaeval era and was based on paternal law, i.e. the coercive control exercised by the father over the woman (marital potestà) by depriving her of her parental responsibility over her children, and control over the children (patria potestà) who were often exploited in the agricultural fields without having any rights (Benjamin 1996; Grignoli, Braba and D'Ambrosio 2022).

Any act done against our will is violence and today, thanks to social, cultural, legislative and political progress, International Organisations and European and National jurisdictions are working to define instruments to prevent and combat gender-based violence (Malizia 2018). The United Nations Organisation defines the concept of “violence as any act that causes, or is likely to cause, physical, sexual or psychological harm, including threats of violence, coercion and arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life” (UN 2023). The World Health Organisation defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community, which results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, poor development or deprivation” (WHO 2023). Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon, there is not just one form of violence but it varies according to the type of offence perpetrated (Acquadro 2012). New terms have been introduced in the Anglo-Saxon context to emphasise who the violence is directed towards, such as 'wife abuse', 'wife battering' and 'women abuse'.

With the aim of defining male violence against women, we consider it useful to refer to the notion of 'gender-based violence' which, while offering a very broad spectrum since it indicates not only violence perpetrated by men against women but all forms of ill-treatment based on gender hatred and sexist discrimination (e.g., those perpetrated against LGBT communities), has the advantage and the merit of subtending the cultural motivations and relational dynamics specific to the most widespread forms of male violence against women (Danna 2007; US Department of State 2022).

The inclusion of the concept of gender in the context of violence against women is the outcome of a long historical process whose culminating expression resides in the “Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence”, better known as the Istanbul Convention, a document adopted by the Council of Europe on 7 April 2011 that sets international standards for preventing and combating violence against women, defining in Art. 3 violence against women as “a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women, including all acts of gender-based violence that cause or are likely to cause harm or suffering of a physical, sexual, psychological or economic nature, including threats to commit such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Iacona 2012; US Department of State 2022).

The expression 'intimate partner violence' derives from the Anglo-Saxon term 'Intimate Partner Violence' (IPV), which is intended to highlight the violence suffered in intimate relationships by the partner or ex-partner and which does not only victimise the woman but also the man (the perpetrator can also be the woman against the male partner or same-sex partner).

## **2. The definition of 'gender' and subsequent studies**

Gender' studies are concerned with analysing the various socio-cultural elements that affect the construct of gender identity and the different social statuses held by men and

women in various contexts. It was necessary to scientifically define the meaning of 'gender' and 'sex', terms that have different meanings but are erroneously used in everyday language as if they were synonyms. The term 'sex' indicates a biological datum that characterises an individual from birth, thus distinguishing man from woman. The term 'gender' or 'gender identity' refers to 'what we feel we are' and is not bound by one's sex, so they do not have to correspond (Volpat 2011). Gender identity has faced harsh social stigmatisation for many years, generating mental schemata in humans to distinguish what is right to do if one is a woman or if one is a man. The process of stigmatisation has made it possible for social prejudices and labels in society to guide human thinking, creating classifications of gender roles that lack scientificity (Bran 2009).

Because of this process, our attitudes, behaviours and interests are guided by real social constructs that distinguish what is feminine from what is masculine, triggering expectations about the behaviour that women and men should adopt; moreover, if they are not met, the risk of incurring social sanctions such as exclusion from the peer group is high. Gender models are presented as if they were 'prisons' for those who are not reflected in them, conditioning individual paths, e.g. stereotypes of women in the workplace do not allow them to hold entrepreneurial positions because by nature they are not as 'authoritative' as a man; they are docile and must be, depowering their subjective capacities. Among the feminist theories that support the idea of gender as a social construct is the theory of Butler (1990), an American philosopher of the post-structuralism current. In her essay entitled "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity", the author discusses her feminist theory of gender performativity, arguing that 'gender' is not related to biological diversity, but is 'performable' through repeated actions over time, fostering misogynistic culture. Gender is a performance that we cannot transgress because we are forced to perform it.

Even De Beauvoir (1979), in one of her most famous quotations "women are not born, but become", makes it clear that she fully shares the theory of gender identity as a social construct by highlighting the difference between 'being a woman' and 'being female'. The term 'gender studies' is recent and emerges to replace the term 'Women's Studies', i.e. 'women's studies about women'. Their aim is to try to understand the causes that foster a male chauvinist culture over time and to identify elements that can be used to understand male violence towards women. The first approach to emerge was a biological one: it is argued that gender inequalities in society find their reason for existence in the biological differences between men and women (Anceschi 2009).

According to proponents of the biological approach, the brains and bodies of human beings are 'programmed' to perform functions and roles according to their sex. The most widespread idea in this regard is that women are born to perform caring and nurturing tasks because they are more empathetic, whereas men are more capable of performing work tasks that require great physical and psychological commitment. Hormones also play a decisive role, testosterone for men, for example, gives them greater determination in work tasks; oxytocin enables women to devote themselves more to the family because it makes them more empathetic and docile. The biological theory overlooks the importance of social relations of socialisation and the culture that prevails in a specific context (Cattaneo 2007). A second theory with a sociological matrix is the sociocultural theory that supports the idea of gender identity as a social construct. From birth, human beings face the process of socialisation in the various contexts of the social structure in which they circulate, and the first context an individual faces is the family context, which is precisely called the 'primary context'.

Socialisation is a complex and natural process that enables the transmission of cultural elements, values, thoughts, traditions, customs and traditions. In this way, values are assimilated that shape and mould the subject's mental patterns (Deriu and Sgritta 2007). The socio-cultural approach repudiates the biological approach, stating that sex certainly has a relevant function in defining the differences between men and women, but it is not the cause of gender identity stereotypes and prejudices because it is culture that is the cause, according to the socio-cultural approach (Cortese and Argentero 2018). If there is a misogynistic culture consisting of sexist and masculinist values in a context, these will also be transmitted through socialisation to future generations born in the same context and so on. Due to social mobility as a result of globalisation, the movement of people across territories in turn leads to the dissemination of their beliefs.

Prejudices and stereotypes are thus acquired by society through a process of cultural transmission to which one is subjected from childhood. Bandura (1984), through his studies on social learning (studies motivated by his interest in the phenomenon of social aggression) explains how the learning process occurs through transmission. For Bandura (1986) learning is based on imitation made possible by positive reinforcement, thus a child assimilates the values of his family through the learning process, adapting and feeling recognised by his family group. With reference to the transmission of sexist beliefs, children will develop the idea that there are behaviours suitable for women and behaviours suitable for men. From the social learning theory, the scholar evinces the concept of 'self-efficacy' as well as the belief that each of us has about our own abilities to perform a task and pursue the goal, thus an individual with high levels of self-efficacy has a very good chance of achieving success, on the contrary, an individual with low levels of self-efficacy will tend to avoid performing tasks for fear of failure.

Studies on perceived efficacy have contributed to analysing the human mind's capacity for self-reflection and self-regulation that are activated in the learning process. Proponents of the sociocultural approach propose useful tools to regenerate new beliefs, different from those imparted by the social and cultural context. The capacity for self-reflection enables the individual to reflect on his or her own experiences and beliefs, and if these are re-evaluated, it will be possible to generate new capacities for thought and action that are far removed from sexist prejudices. The capacity for 'self-regulation', on the other hand, allows one to govern one's behaviour according to internal models, avoiding conditioning by external factors. In addition, it is possible to remedy the effects produced by a certain socialisation process experienced by an individual through the process of 're-socialisation', which is typical of totalitarian institutions such as monasteries or military districts and consists of the despoliation of the self. Different is the classical psychoanalytic approach according to which the development of sexual identity begins during the Oedipal phase, conditioning individual thinking about gender and gender roles (Bergmann 2010).

Scholars of the psychoanalytic approach maintain that women, unlike men, in the absence of a penis, do not fully develop their personality, remaining in a condition of moral weakness and envy towards men, who, having a penis, will feel more self-confident. This condition would lead to the generation of gender models firmly anchored in the prejudice that women are weaker than men who, on the contrary, have dealt positively with the Oedipal complex. The only solution for women to put up with their inferiority condition is to devote themselves to the care and protection of their offspring, accepting the compromise of only filling certain roles reserved for them. In recent years, a new

'gender theory' belonging to the current of post-structuralism has been elaborated under the name 'Queer theory' and has profoundly reformed the way the concept of gender is understood. Among the most famous proponents is Judith Butler with her theory on the performativity of gender (Butler 1990).

### **3. Stereotypes and prejudices about the phenomenon of gender-based violence and women victims of violence**

Stereotypes and prejudices about women have their origins in patriarchal and macho systems. Before defining the concept of prejudice, which is necessary for understanding gender studies and mistreatment, it is useful to go back to the social structure of the past. The term 'patriarchy' literally means 'the law of the father' and is related to the typical family context of medieval and feudal times in which the man, also called the 'father-master', assumed a position of authority, power and control over both his children and his partner. In the past, family roles were hierarchically ordered, the man ordered his children and wife not to disregard his directives, otherwise they would incur physical and verbal punishment (Ilie 2015). The power of the father-master was referred to as 'patria potestà' and it was only with the enactment of Law No. 151/1975 that the Italian Civil Code no longer discussed patria potestà but rather the notion of 'parental authority', which presupposes the recognition of parental authority over children to both parents.

Even the term 'potestà' meaning 'power' would later be re-evaluated and replaced with the term 'responsibility', with the aim of stating that no one can be anyone's master, not even their own children. This change led to the need to introduce new laws that could regulate the relationship between spouses by emancipating women in family relationships. In this regard, Article 29 of the Constitution recognises in its second paragraph, in accordance with Article 3 of the Italian Constitution (principle of equality), the moral and legal equality of spouses. In our society, the use of the term 'patriarchy' has become excessive, but as socio-cultural theory explains, values are handed down from generation to generation and macho thoughts still resonate in the minds of the present. The term prejudice is used in psychology to refer to an attitude, generally negative, directed at a group or social category, or anyone belonging to it, imagined as a generic exponent of that group and, as such, the object of an evaluation that disregards their individual characteristics.

Prejudice is defined as an evaluation expressed before having all the necessary elements available to make a considered and reliable judgement. Prejudices create stereotypes as well as patterns that guide the way we see reality and trigger expectations. The most commonly shared examples of stereotypes about the phenomenon of gender-based violence are based on the belief that violence concerns disadvantaged social classes with backward cultural traditions, or that the phenomenon of gender-based violence is a public safety problem that can be overcome if only women were more cautious when walking the streets alone; or that gender-based violence is an issue concerning conflict in relationships that can be resolved by resorting to family mediation (US Department of State 2022). These stereotypes have been disproved thanks to data collected by Istat researchers (Istat 2021), according to which Italian women suffer violence from Italian men and no more than 10% of rapes are attributable to foreigners.

Most abuse takes place within the home at any time of the day and, in the case of conflict, family mediation professionals suggest avoiding mediation in the case of gender-based violence, both because the mediation pathway provides for the absence of court litigation (risking preventing the woman from filing a complaint), and because the ethics of

mediation require both partners to take responsibility for the causes of the conflict that have arisen and in the case of gender-based violence the abuser alone is responsible. The most widely shared stereotypes of women victims of violence are based on the belief that women are fragile and prone to emotional dependency, that they are provocative and desire dominant men (UN 2021). Again, the data show that among women victims of violence, apart from being accomplished in their studies and work, there is no clinical model of a woman vulnerable to violence. Other stereotypes target male perpetrators of violence based on the belief that most abusers are alcoholics or drug addicts (certainly risk factors for victimisation for women who enter into a relationship with them) or that they have been in the grip of a rapture.

The sad Italian experience sees as perpetrators of gender-based violence mainly men who are perfectly integrated in social contexts and, moreover, raptus is not contemplated in gender-based violence because violence extends along a continuum of violent acts perpetrated over time, while the reiteration of the crime presupposes voluntariness and awareness in the perpetrator.

#### **4. The cycle of abuse in the couple**

It is crucial to distinguish 'conflict' from 'violence', terms sometimes used as if they were synonymous. Conflict is a struggle involving the clash of different interests; it is certainly not a positive sign for the couple and can be so heated as to hurt one or both of them morally. In conflict, the partners remain on an equal footing, allowing through communication and couple mediation to find a balance in the relationship and a solution to the conflict that can be healthy and common to all couples. Conflict can be remedied and presupposes the responsibility of both in triggering it. Violence is a crime and the perpetrator is only the abuser, therefore the victim is not responsible for the violence suffered and since it is not a conflict it cannot be defined as 'healthy' or questionable violence in couple mediation. In violence communication is not an expression of constructive debate but is used for the purpose of prevaricating the other and confrontation cannot be assumed.

Being a victim of violence does not imply continuity and persistence of abuse, because even a single event of ill-treatment implies being a victim of violence. In couple relationships violence is often cyclic, i.e. it has several distinct phases in its development that aim at weakening the victim until he/she becomes totally vulnerable and finds no way out of the relationship in which the abuse has become chronic. In 1979, the scholar Walker proposed a descriptive model of the cycle of violence explaining the victim's difficulty in realising that he or she is in danger. The cycle of violence is gradual and intermittent, i.e. it alternates between phases of full affection and phases of emotional and/or physical abuse, e.g., the first slap can be considered an exception to normality that is justified by the victim by periods of stress experienced by the abuser.

In the model presented by Walker (1979) the first phase of violence is the 'honeymoon', a phase of love-bombing, attention, gifts and appreciation. Through this love bombing, the violent partner manages to win the trust of his partner. The second phase is called the 'tension phase' in which the violence is not blatant, but the partner starts to behave in a hostile and unusual way. The victim is confused at this point and will continue to justify his partner by thinking of his stress caused by his workload and worries. Once this second phase has passed, the 'moment of attack' begins, when the violence is more tangible, the violent partner starts to shout, to denigrate the partner who, if she tries to

defend herself or assert her opinion, will be attacked more than before because her partner will feel threatened by the loss of control over her partner.

This leads to the 'repentance phase' in which the man realises the probable consequence of permanently losing the partner he so badly needs to satisfy his perverse interests and desires, returning once again to bombard her with love and attention, trying to regain her trust in order to obtain forgiveness. Once forgiveness is obtained, the violence is repeated like a vicious circle that ensnares the woman in a perverse relationship from which she cannot escape. Given the incidence of gender-based violence, with the aim of preventing all forms of violence, 'victimisation risk indicators' have been identified by professionals. A partner who complains of symptoms of psychic impatience such as hallucinations, anxiety or depression may have violent reactions towards those around him. Another alarm bell is the use of drugs and/or alcohol, which increase the risk of victimisation, since the partner experiences a condition of psycho-physical alteration and detachment from the surrounding reality when taking the substance.

Criminal records for offences against the person and the violation of court orders, such as a prohibition to approach, are other risk factors. The victim is vulnerable when she is in a state of social isolation and does not know to whom she should confess the violence she has suffered, if she does not express her intention to turn to the competent authorities, or for the foreign victim who has recently lived in a different cultural context, it is difficult for her to know the social welfare services in the area. It is likely that the woman is so terrified of the abuser that she feels powerless and unable to ask for help, other women, on the other hand, feel the need to justify their partner or feel responsible for a possible family break-up, especially if there are dependent children. Economic independence is also a 'vulnerability factor'. Some men take advantage of the disadvantaged economic situation experienced by their partner by threatening her with eviction from their home, putting the woman and her children at risk.

### **5. Physical and psychological violence**

According to Malizia (2015) "Physical violence is that form of violence aimed at causing physical harm to the victim. It includes beatings, punches, slaps, throwing of objects, grabbing, murder or attempted murder. This form of violence is not only manifested through direct physical contact causing injuries on the woman's body, but also includes implicit actions such as sleep deprivation or deprivation of medically necessary care for the victim. Physical violence can be perpetrated continuously or intermittently, although even a single episode makes the woman a victim of gender-based violence, since regardless of the frequency of beatings, all acts of physical violence presuppose domination over the other through an exercise of power. Psychological violence' affects the victim's identity by humiliating and denigrating her through the use of words, threats, attitudes and behaviour aimed at manipulating and assuming omnipotent control, all actions and attitudes that undermine the victim's self-esteem, freedom and self-determination". Among the various forms of psychological violence is also 'spiritual violence', which consists of denigrating the woman's religious beliefs, forcing her to perform spiritual practices against her will:

#### **(a) sexual violence and rape**

"Sexual violence" is defined as "any attempt to obtain a sexual act or other act directed against a person's sexuality, using coercion, by any person irrespective of the existing relationship with the victim, in any context. It includes rape (which is



characterised by the use of physical force), defined as the forcible penetration, or otherwise the result of coercion, of the vulva or anus by means of the penis, another body part, or an object” (Who 2023). Rape is, therefore, a complete non-consensual sexual act. Attempted rape has almost the same impact on the victim who suffers it. Sexual abuse includes denial of the use of contraceptive methods, provocation of pain on the victim during a sexual act, obscene calls, sexual jokes, intentional unwelcome contact with bodies, and so on. On 15 February 1996, Law No. 66 came into force in Italy, enshrining the 'norms against sexual violence' and repealing the articles contained in the Rocco Code, according to which rape was understood as a 'crime against morality and decency'. Today, the crime of sexual violence is considered an “offence against the person”, which is regulated in Article 609 bis of the Criminal Code.

### **b) Economic violence**

“Economic violence presents itself as a form of direct and indirect control of someone else's money, which aims to hinder the economic independence of the victim. This form of violence also manifests itself within the workplace due to prejudices and stereotypes about women, who are commonly regarded as weak subjects devoted to childcare and more competent in the helping professions, not allowing women to reach high levels of responsibility in the professional sphere and forcing them into a form of occupational segregation that sees them engaged in low-profile professions. This condition is referred to as vertical discrimination. Women are often asked during job interviews if they have a desire for motherhood, which is seen as an obstacle for the business economy since working women on maternity leave are entitled to paid working leave. In this regard, one issue that concerns and aims to recognise more autonomy and economic independence for women is the Gender Pay Gap”. Since women have not had the opportunity to occupy high-level professional positions, their income will never be equal to men's income. Due to the change from the wage system to the contributory system, today's elderly female population is particularly affected, getting the minimum pension during retirement age (EIGE 2023).

### **c) Domestic and witnessing violence**

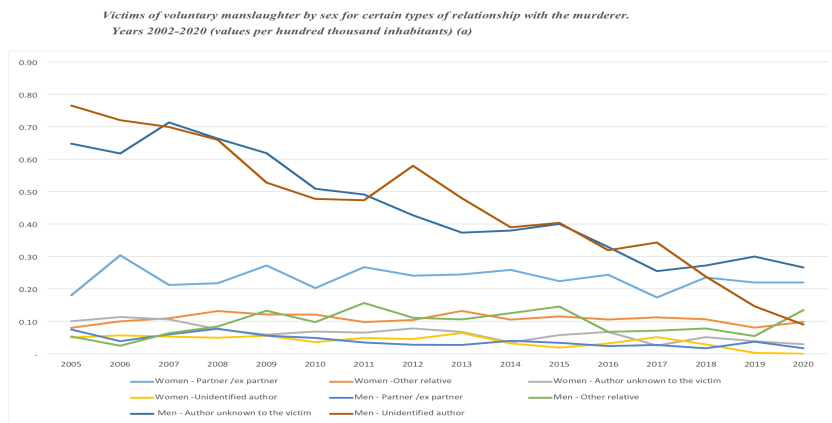
In gender-based violence, 'domestic violence' is a declination of it, indicating all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or between current and former partners, regardless of whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim. Gender-based violence can be perpetrated by a stranger or an acquaintance, but, according to research on the subject, the most frequent perpetrator is the one who has an intimate relationship with the victim. Essential is the definition of the concept of 'witnessing violence', a useful expression to indicate that form of violence in which the protagonists are children who witness acts of physical, verbal, psychological, sexual or economic abuse on their mother or other affectively important family members. Children may experience witnessing violence directly, when the violence occurs in their perceptual field (in front of the children or in a place in the home where screams and noises are heard) or indirectly by perceiving the effects and the negative surrounding atmosphere, or by seeing the wounds on the mother's body or her state of fear and awe towards the father after a violent act. Children of abused women are more likely than their peers to be victims of witnessing violence. An abusive partner is also an abusive parent as perpetrator of emotional abuse towards his children; even some abusers go so far

as to involve their children through manipulative behaviour or emotional blackmail. In some families the father exploits his children by asking them to mediate between him and their mother, or in a more tacit way manipulates them in order to trigger rancour in the relationship with the mother. The symptoms of witnessing violence are manifold and the most recurrent problems are delays and difficulties in the development of language or motor skills, sleep disorders, night terrors, somatisation, learning difficulties, hyperactivity and eating disorders (Edleson 1999).

**d) Stalking and feminicide**

“Stalking” (a term deriving from the English 'to stalk', which means to lurk, to follow, to stalk) is a form of aggression enacted by a persecutor who breaks into the private life of another individual in a repetitive, unwanted and destructive manner, causing the latter serious physical or psychological consequences. “Art. 612-bis of the Italian Criminal Code (persecutory acts) states: 'unless the act constitutes a more serious offence, anyone who, with repeated conduct, threatens or harasses someone in such a way as to cause a persistent and serious state of anxiety or fear or to create a well-founded fear for their safety or that of a close relative or person linked to them by a relationship of affection, or to force them to alter their lifestyle, shall be punished by imprisonment of between six months and four years”. In the most fatal cases, the violence ends with 'feminicide', a term coined by the sociologist Diana Russell, meaning “killing of the woman as a woman”, which is useful to distinguish any murder from the murder of a woman that finds its reasons in gender discrimination and mistreatment (Russell and Harmes 2001).

**Fig. 1. - Victims of voluntary manslaughter by sex for certain types of relationship with the murderer (between 2002-2020 in Italy)<sup>1</sup>**



**6. The characteristics of psychological violence**

Psychological violence is an emerging phenomenon that is among the various forms of ill-treatment that a woman in general victim of gender-based violence can suffer

<sup>1</sup> Source ISTAT: <https://www.istat.it/it/violenza-sulle-donne/il-percorso-giudiziario/denunce>, accessed 11th May 2023.

from a partner or/and ex-partner. This form of violence has been neglected by professionals and society for a long time because compared to physical or sexual violence it does not leave obvious marks on the victim's body, but strongly affects the psychological and social well-being of the battered woman. For this reason psychological violence is also known as 'invisible violence'. There are different expressions to address psychological violence such as 'moral abuse', 'psychological ill-treatment' or 'indirect aggression' (EIGE 2023).

Article 3 of the Istanbul Convention ratified in 2011 mentions psychological violence and states: "Domestic violence refers to all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence occurring within the family or household or between current or former spouses or partners, regardless of whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim". Psychological ill-treatment can be perpetrated in various forms, both overt and covert, which have in common, however, the aim of manipulating the victim. The effects on the victim are devastating, which is why it is necessary to make psychological violence a phenomenon that is better known to society and to identify tools for treatment and prevention. In order to understand the roots of the phenomenon of psychological abuse, its dynamics and effects on the victim, it is necessary to analyse the profile of the abuser to explain the nature of his violent actions. In the case of psychological abuse, the perverse trait affects the continuum in proximity to the narcissistic disorder: since patients with narcissistic personality disorder have difficulty regulating self-esteem, they need praise and affiliation with special people or institutions; they also tend to devalue other people so that they can maintain a sense of superiority (EIGE 2023).

The narcissist is a megalomaniac subject who has an infallible idea of his or her own self and in addition to continually seeking personal success, in order to maintain a high level of self-esteem, needs to feel fulfilled and idolised by others and otherwise is very sensitive to others' prejudice. What is most interesting about the same personality profile with regard to psychological maltreatment is the behaviour that the heterosexual narcissist adopts towards the female partner whom he considers 'special' in his life compared to other women. In contrast to situations in healthy romantic relationships in which the possibility of 'using' the partner for one's own interests is excluded, the narcissist feels a strong need to use the other, belittling him or her in order to feel 'superior' through the use of threats, insults, denigration and omnipotent control in order to keep the victim bound in the relationship (Bushman and Baumeister 1998). It is often taken for granted that the term 'perversion' only has to do with the sexual sphere. The term 'sexual perversion' has been replaced by some intellectuals with the term 'neo-sexuality' coined by the scholar McDougall (1985), or with the term 'paraphilias' or 'sexual dysfunctions'. The concept of perversion today takes on connotations and moralistic value references that come close to the study of 'moral perversion' of a non-sexual kind. Recamier recalls the concept of "perversion that is not sexual, but moral, not erotic, but narcissistic" elaborated by De Masi (2007); in fact, a typical characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder is that of indifference towards the object relationship to the point of not recognising the existence of the other so that the perpetrator can maintain the illusion of being able to do without any object, satisfying his perverse needs. The object relationship turns into a power relationship that corrupts the relationship between the partners, so the pervert gains control over both the relationship and the victim who is destroyed and frightened. In sexual perversion, the value of pleasure is shared by the members of the couple who obtain

pleasure from their mode of relationship, and they may also decide to reverse roles. In the case of relational perversion there can be no role reversal because the pervert always prevails over the other because what he wants is to satisfy only his perverse desires. Filippini (2022) states that the perpetrator's attitude has another purpose as well as to avoid inner conflict. By devaluing and making the victim suffer, the perpetrator manages to save mental efforts to ensure her psychic well-being by making others pay for her suffering and the causes that produce it. In the power relationship that is triggered between victim and perpetrator, the former does not realise that she is an instrument for satisfying the perverse impulses and desires of the latter actor. The narcissistic abuser can be an 'overt' subject, i.e. with high levels of self-esteem, or a 'covert' subject, i.e. with low levels of self-esteem (Bushman and Baumeister 1998). With reference to the previous difference between the narcissistic profiles, the perverse relationship sees its development in the couple differently. The first encounter between victim and persecutor is always a pleasant one, but in the case of the encounter with the overt narcissist, the latter succeeds in shining his light on his partner. In the case of the covert narcissist, who is incapable of exposing himself and who possesses a very hostile view of his own self, the relationship is much more involving because the pervert for the first time in his life receives appreciation from a woman feeling fulfilled, thus deciding to show the best part of himself, hiding his true nature, until he convinces the victim that he is the right man. The pervert moves on to the idealisation phase, making the woman feel that she is the best being of all. With the passage of time, she begins to notice that her partner engages in ambiguous behaviour that will eventually wear down their relationship, but, come this time, it will be even more difficult to break off the relationship, especially for the pervert who can only feel good by being in contact with the victim to whom he is dependent in an emotional sense. The pervert comes fully into action at this stage starting to show his violent nature that he has kept hidden, devaluing his partner to the point of making her confused and disoriented, and this, despite the fact that she continues to believe that he will change, or that perhaps, she is mistaken. In the case of the overt narcissist, his goal is to satisfy his needs through his woman, who will be exploited more and more or even replaced with other women, although she is unique to the pervert because she alone possesses what he needs to feel good, so he will never be willing to leave her (Bushman and Baumeister 1998). The woman becomes trapped in a perverse relationship because of her partner's 'good side' that does not really exist. According to contemporary feminists, this attitude is a 'coping' strategy that women resort to in order to resist psychological abuse.

**7. Bandura and the moral disengagement theory**

With the expression 'moral disengagement', Bandura (1990), known for his studies on cognitive learning, refers to those psychological mechanisms that are used when one feels the need to 'disengage from moral self-sanctions' and from the sense of guilt triggered by offending someone.

**Tab. 1 (Moral disengagement - Bandura)**

Mechanisms	Disengagement
Moral justification of conduct	Reinterpretation of the negative or wrongful action according to moral content that is meaningful to the perpetrator but not to the external observer.

Advantageous comparison	Reducing the seriousness of the act in relation to more serious conduct by highlighting the advantage it has produced.
Displacement of reality	When actions are carried out in a group and it is easier to attribute responsibility to the leader for the harmful conduct, so that the rest of the group perceives themselves as mere executors of a command.
Attribution of blame to the victim	The responsibility for the offence lies with the offender as a provocative or submissive victim.
Dehumanisation of the victim	The victim is different from others, not human, and therefore not deserving of respect and compassion.
Euphemistic labelling	Dehumanising the victim by using language to make what is not acceptable, changing and manipulating the perception of facts from the victim's own eyes.

According to Wertham, a German-born American psychiatrist, the mechanism of 'de-humanisation' allows the aggressor to deny the human identity of the victim by justifying his non-violent action because the victim is seen as an object that does not suffer pain.

### **8. Moral abuses and their effects on victims**

In Italian law, 'abuse' is defined as various crimes or offences that have as a common element the illegitimate use of a thing or the illegitimate exercise of a power. Moral abuse, according to Malizia (2015) is the most recurrent form of violence of narcissistic personalities. Manipulation and destruction of self-esteem will be the most frequently used forms of aggression here. Moral abuse falls under the branch of psychological violence.

#### **a) Gaslighting and crazy-making**

Gaslighting' is a form of cognitive manipulation and consists of the intention to manipulate the victim by insinuating on the truthfulness of one's perceptions and the lucidity of one's reasoning, to the point of inducing in the victim the belief that he or she has a mental disorder. The term originates from a play entitled 'Gas Light' in Italian 'Luci a Gas'. In the film 'L'Angoscia', cinematographer A. Hitckcock shows how this form of moral abuse manifests itself in romantic relationships. The protagonist is an abusive male partner who convinces his wife that he is hallucinating events that actually happened, or alleged actions that are not only true, but are also caused by him manipulating the environment by dimming the lights in the house in order to make her believe she is insane (Filippini 2005). Gaslighting takes place when the partner deliberately decides to distort reality through lies and trivial wrongs in order to trigger anxious and negative moods in the victim who ends up becoming a truth-seeking detective. Even when the truth comes out and the woman tries to communicate with her partner he will deny it to the point of convincing her that she is crazy and paranoid, punishing her with silence and humiliation. Crazy-making' is a manipulation mechanism that refers to the use of psychological tricks to destabilise the victim by making them confused and disoriented, to the point of no longer believing even themselves (Sweet 2019).

### **b) Sexual manipulation and triangulation**

The narcissistic partner is a predator who wants to dominate his partner sexually, emotionally and physically. Sex can be a tool the abusive partner uses to manipulate the victim. The abuser is well versed in the art of seduction and wants to study any aspect of the victim in order to understand her most intimate vulnerabilities which, once discovered, will be used as a target, trying to idealise the intimate and sexual sphere that is created between the two until passion skyrockets. In reality, he does not share the same emotional and spiritual pleasure with his partner, he simply kept an eye on her even in the most intimate sphere (Clifton 2022). The moment the woman realises that the passion is not shared, a crisis is triggered in her to the extent that she does not feel enough for her partner, yet she will still seek contact with him who will reject her and tease her about her erotic fantasies that seemed to be shared. Triangulation' is a mechanism that consists of bringing a third party into the intimate relationship with the aim of destabilising one's partner who will no longer feel enough for her man, but above all, the narcissist resorts to triangulation because for individuals with this personality trait, feeling and being surrounded by several women means that his thirst for attention can be quenched. Triangulation begins when the man boasts to his woman that he is surrounded by beautiful female admirers. After the love-bombing and idealisation phase, the abuser decides it is time to manipulate other victims so that he can possess more women who can satisfy his desires, raising his self-esteem levels. Sometimes he uses triangulation to make his partner jealous as seeing her in competition with other women fighting to conquer him makes him feel the best, he uses people and not only women, but he can also manipulate his own friends, family, friends of his partner or ex-partner, he also often alludes to the possibility of dating other people so that no victim is ever quiet (Buehler and Welsh 2009).

### **c) spiritual violence, insults, silence**

“Spiritual violence is moral abuse that manifests itself through the denigration of a woman's religious beliefs to the point of preventing her from attending places of worship and religious groups, convincing her to perform other spiritual practices against her will” (Bent-Goodley and Fowler 2006). Denying the possibility of professing a religious faith is an expression of denial of identity and freedom. Talking too much can be a sign of unhealthy communication, talking too little is a sign of empty communication. Insulting, despising in public and in private, threatening, unpleasant sarcasm, expressing negative judgements on one's partner's lifestyle, ridiculing her physical appearance and her thoughts or mannerisms, controlling the woman as if she were property to be moulded and controlled, demanding constant explanations and updates on what she is doing and who she is with, compulsive phone calls, isolation from friends, hindering her meetings and personal outings, are behaviours that affect the woman's self-esteem and her social and private life, which is completely obliterated and perpetually obstructed and controlled. Silence is a lethal weapon but also an instrument of identity erosion. It can be seen as punishment without appearing overtly manipulative, and when a sensitive and empathic person is denied communication and confrontation, the result is self-destruction because she will begin to compulsively reflect on her possibly non-existent mistakes (Bent-Goodley and Fowler 2006).

## **9. The effects of violence on women**

For the World Health Organisation, gender-based violence is a public health problem of epidemic proportions and the leading cause of death or permanent disability for

women worldwide. Violence does not only affect health in the short term, on the contrary it can produce psychosomatic symptoms and chronic disorders that cause an increase in stress hormones that compromise the immune system. Two scientific disciplines, neuroscience and psychotraumatology, which have contributed to research on gender studies, must be acknowledged as important contributors. The causes of violence for women's physical health are typically traumatic injuries such as ruptured eardrums, wounds in different parts of the body, burns, lacerations and fractures. But also dermatological disorders, injuries to the uro-genital system and chronic fatigue. In the event that the woman is pregnant, it is possible that a miscarriage may occur due to the injuries sustained; this violent act is an offence called 'involuntary termination of pregnancy' (Dubini and Curiel 2004). On the contrary, a typical action of perverse men is to have sex without precautions with their woman in order to have a child without the two of them ever having spoken about it because they convince themselves that thanks to the presence of a child they can trap their partner in the relationship. The social consequences are isolation from friendly groups or work colleagues, frequent absences from work due to illness, and a progressive reduction in maternal authority. In terms of mental health a woman victim of violence runs a high risk of depression about 5/6 times higher than a woman who has not suffered violence. Depression is a typical disorder of women victims of gender-based violence who have to cope with a strong sense of shame and loss of self-esteem.

Post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD) consists of recurring memories, compulsive thoughts and flashbacks about the traumatic event experienced, which the woman experiences as if she were reliving the violence. The most common risks are hyper-vigilance, strong reactivity and dulling of emotions (US Department of State 2022). The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder have been defined by the DSM (American Psychiatric Association, Italian Edition DSM-5-TR) for traumatic events circumscribed in time (war combatants, victims of natural disasters). Herman (1992) proposed a diagnostic category for women victims of gender-based violence or for those who have experienced long-lasting trauma, the disorder is called 'complex post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome' and its general symptoms are depression, panic attacks, somatisation, hypochondria self-harm, chronic suicidal worry, persistent dysphoria, explosive rage, compulsive or extremely inhibited sexuality, disturbances in intimate relationships, repeated search for a saviour, persistent distrust, amnesia or hypermnesia for traumatic events, shame, guilt and self-denigration (Bandini 2003). The 'Stockholm syndrome', on the other hand, expresses a psychological state of paradoxical dependency and affects those victims who begin to harbour positive feelings towards their aggressor, experiencing guilt should they be arrested. According to some scholars, it is a coping technique used to react to trauma (Namnyak, M., Tufton, N., Szekely, R., Toal, M., Worboys, S. & Sampson, E. 2008). This syndrome provides an explanation for the stereotype about women victims of violence that it is women themselves who are attracted to violent men. To explain what factors make it difficult to leave the abuser, Walker (1979) called the 'battered woman syndrome', which she elaborates to explain how the woman goes from being the 'victim' to being the 'perpetrator' of her tormentor, extending the concept of self-defence. Its use within the criminal justice system is still widely discussed (Ilie Goga 2015). In cases of intra-family abuse where the couple has dependent children, it is likely that they will end up as victims of witnessing violence (Apollonio et. al 2013). A syndrome that can occur when being a victim of witnessing violence is 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' (PAS),

which consists of a child's psychological rejection of one or both parental figures. Psychiatrist Gardner (2001) notes that PAS is the result of 'brainwashing' by an alienating parent. It is not unusual in cases of male violence towards women for the aggressor to manipulate the son into taking his side, with the aim of perpetrating even more violence on the mother, who will feel denigrated in her role as mother and woman.

## 10. Conclusions

The issues of gender-based violence are complex and have always existed; today they are mainly discussed thanks to the political-social changes promoted in Italy and in other nations, thus emphasising the importance of preventing and combating gender-based violence as it produces harmful effects on the health of family members and the protagonists of the victimisation process. The Welfare-State is the form that characterises Italy and which places the well-being of mankind in a global sense at the centre of its interests and hopes to achieve equality and parity among citizens, regardless of their differences. Theories on gender issues, aimed at investigating the nature of the phenomenon, have established that gender-based violence is rooted in a male chauvinist and patriarchal culture that has spread, (as explained by the socio-cultural theory), and this would explain, despite the social progress being made, why misogyny and gender-based violence are still phenomena. Psychological violence has been underestimated for a long time because of its hidden signs that make it difficult to perceive both by the professional eye and for the victim herself, but the psycho-social and somatic damages that are inflicted on her are highly detrimental to her health and her sociality. This is why the Social Service, as the helping profession par excellence, cannot refrain in its necessary interventions to ensure that women can escape from the circuit of violence in collaboration with other professionals and by resorting to networking, so that she can re-establish her condition of autonomy and empowerment of her resources. In addition, efforts are made to eliminate prejudices about the profession so that women are more confident in using social welfare services, especially without fearing not only of social prejudices, but also that their parental responsibility may be questioned if there are no grounds to contest it. Even today, studies dedicated to the design of instruments to prevent violence have not been completed and listening and anti-violence centres are widespread throughout the territory, in order to guarantee essential aid services both for the battered woman and for their possible children, trying to adapt to change, to the needs and requirements of women who are victims of physical, psychological, economic and social abuse.

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