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A Troublesome Frame: Media Representation of Abused Women in Contemporary Italy

Un ritratto problematico: la rappresentazione mediatica della donna maltrattata nell'Italia contemporanea

Abstract

This essay focuses on media representation of intimate partner violence¹, with special attention paid to the image of the abused woman. The figure of the male portrait will also be examined.

My argument is that institutional and popular products share a similar view both about IPV and victims of abuse: the first is considered to be anomalous, the second weak and passive.

This happens precisely because of the existence of a social representation on intimate partner violence. Of course, representations of IPV vary greatly depending on the individuals involved.

Despite differences, some recurring points are undeniable.

On the one hand, reporting is shown to be the main solution to the problem, but on the other hand blaming and silencing of the victims is more than common in these messages. As a result, a vicious circle takes shape: as long as reporting to the authorities is shown as the most appropriate solution for coping with the problem, whoever doesn't choose the institutional solution will be silenced, thus compromising the recovery of the abused woman.

I will argue that considering the complexity that each situation of intimate partner violence involves is the first step towards acknowledging the need to develop an alternative representation; specifically, one that focuses on the variety of assistance provided by anti-violence centers.

¹ From now on, I will frequently refer to Intimate Partner Violence as IPV.

Keywords: domestic violence, abused women, media representation, report, victim blaming.

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Abstract

In questo saggio l'interesse è rivolto alla rappresentazione mediatica della violenza domestica in Italia. Una speciale attenzione è rivolta all'immagine della donna maltrattata, mentre i ritratti dell'autore delle violenze, sebbene non trascurati, hanno una posizione secondaria. È mia convinzione che sia testi istituzionali che popolari condividano un simile punto di vista sull'argomento: la violenza domestica è spesso considerata un'anomalia, mentre le donne maltrattate sono di frequente definite deboli e passive. Tutto ciò è possibile grazie all'esistenza di un "Discorso Egemone sulla Violenza Domestica". Chiaramente la rappresentazione della violenza nelle relazioni di intimità varia ampiamente a seconda del soggetto che la produce, ma ciò non toglie che si presentino alcuni motivi ricorrenti nei testi mediatici analizzati. Tra questi, è innegabile che la denuncia sia mostrata come soluzione principale al problema. Altrettanto frequente è anche la tendenza a silenziare e colpevolizzare le vittime di abusi. Il risultato è un circolo vizioso: se ci sono gli strumenti per contrastare la violenza ma non vengono usati, ogni donna che decide di non allinearsi al discorso egemone è completamente responsabile della situazione in cui versa. Tutto ciò va inevitabilmente a compromettere il percorso di uscita dalla violenza. Nella parte finale del saggio, sostengo la necessità di creare una rappresentazione alternativa, nello specifico una che prenda in considerazione la complessità della situazione di violenza e l'aiuto che in questo contesto possono fornire i centri antiviolenza.

Parole chiave: Violenza Domestica, donna maltrattata, rappresentazione mediatica, denuncia, colpevolizzazione vittime

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State of the Art

Since the second half of the twentieth century, domestic violence has become an increasingly popular issue. A first step towards this direction was feminist engagement with IPV: following the now well known belief that the personal is political, Feminists started asking for public solutions to deal with the problem. Behind their activism lied the still very contemporary concept that “male violence within intimate relationships results from historic and current power differentials that keep women subordinate, primarily through the use of control, including physical, sexual, economic and psychological abuse, comprising tactics of intimidation and isolations” (McPhail et al., 2007 p.818).

Such a starting point, unseverable from a feminist model of domestic violence, is only one part of the contributions on IPV deriving from different branches of knowledge: anthropologically speaking, a great improvement in challenging the social roles sustaining women’s subordination was achieved thanks to Margaret Mead. Her work among seven societies of the Pacific Islands led in fact to the discovery of the social construction of gender: as any other artifact, gender differs from one society to another, being far from natural. An even more radical rethinking of the categories of identity is based on Judith Butler’s statements on sex, which is seen as a social construct rather than a biological entity. These two scholars gave fundamental contributions² to the field of study of IPV, allowing the opportunity to challenge, at least theoretically, some of the social beliefs which support domestic violence. Another significant trend of studies on domestic violence features a critical approach to the feminist model. *An integrative feminist model* by McPhail et al. serves as an example: whereas in the authors’ opinion some elements of the feminist model should be maintained, they acknowledge the need to develop alternatives, for example in respect of increasing clients’ choice in deciding their future.

Focusing on the Italian academic situation regarding the analysis of Intimate Partner Violence, a work worth mentioning is Romito’s (2005), *Un silenzio assordante: la violenza occultata su donne e minori*. The dissertation focuses on the silence that too often surrounds victims, dealing with topics such as the silencing of abused women through public victim blaming, the questionability of individually focused explanations of violence and the acknowledgement of ways in which the attention is shifted from

² Here I refer respectively to Margaret Mead’s *Male and Female* (1979) and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1999).



men's guilt. The sociologist Danna wrote in 2009 an essay regarding institutional answers to women's request for help, underlying a lack of will to intervene in different cases (Danna, 2009). Volpato's work on the psychology of male chauvinism, in which she defines some of the mechanisms that encourage violence against women is also outstanding. Through the examination of historical documents, social psychology experiments and contemporary stereotypes she outlines how women are dehumanized and consequently become victims of violence (Volpato, 2013).

In such a context³, I would like to make a contribution to this field of studies by analyzing the representation of IPV in the Italian mass media.

Aims and Research Focus

Domestic violence is a widespread problem in Italian society: crime reports, TV programs and the news deal with the issue on a regular basis.

Following Italian frontline workers' continuous criticism⁴ regarding the inadequacy of national solutions used to cope with the problem, I decided to question how media messages portray Intimate Partner Violence. Examination of women's role in these ads will be central. Furthermore, even if not at the centre of the attention, male presence will also be evaluated. This, I believe, is a good approach to escaping the trend that too often excludes abusers from IPV related research⁵.

The main aim is an analysis of the Italian mass media social discourse on IPV, leading to an evaluation of the wider meaning of these complex social representations. For this purpose of analysis I examined a total amount of 33 texts, taking care with the differentiation of the sources. As for the nature of the texts, to narrow the seemingly endless cultural products concerning IPV, I focused firstly on messages featuring a figurative approach to describing the issue. A second selection was made on the basis of text public exposure, whether on traditional broadcasting networks or web. For the most

³ Further readings on IPV were written by anthropologists (Bartolomei, 2009), health professionals (Abramsky et al. 2011; Antai 2011) and Novelists (Agnello Hornby & Calloni, 2013). For world data on domestic violence see United Nations' reports regarding world conferences on women (United Nations 1980, 1985, 1995) and *Innocenti Digest* (Unicef, 2000). For specific Italian statistics on the issue see ISTAT (ISTAT, 2006). For a broader analysis on gender bias which affects women's everyday lives (with focus on labour division) see Mies (1986), Zajczyk (2007), Volpato (2011).

⁴ I am referring particularly to D.i.Re- Donne in rete contro la violenza's domestic violence service providers.

⁵ According to Romito, who commit violence is hardly mentioned in IPV related studies, thus leading to an unburdening of the abuser (Romito, 2005, p. 59). Though I've tried to avoid such a problem, I am aware that men presence in IPV representations needs a further, more in depth examination.

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part video analysis is involved, although in some occasions, precisely because of the nature of their wide appeal. I resorted to photographic campaigns as well. Regardless of the textual form, the examined representations vary according to their release date, the earliest dating back to 2009, the most recent being a 2015 cultural product. Moreover, I made no distinction among fiction production and actual representations of facts. This is precisely because I consider them both to be “something made”, a specific outcome of social representations regarding IPV. For the sake of convenience, I outlined three categories⁶ of media messages about the issue: first, state-related advertising. This one is followed by journalist understanding about the fact and independent products. Believing, with Clifford Geertz (1973), that description is a useful tool for interpreting culture, the analysis method is one of “thick description”. First, I described the social discourse in a *thin* way, namely outlining the characteristics of the cultural event. I then moved forward to uncover structures of signification and through this interpretation I finally made an attempt to shape a comprehensible meaningful social frame. For the purpose of this study, i.e., analyzing Italian media products on IPV, I conducted distance research, evaluating sources without a direct social participation in social interactions⁷ (Evans, 2010). I did so believing that productions are both cultural and cultural artifacts. Before going straight to the heart of the matter, I would like to make one final consideration. In this paper, great value was given to the most commonly known form of IPV, namely men’s violence against women: although worthy of interest, other shades of the issue were excluded from the essay’s focus. Being aware of the complexity of situations that involve violence towards children or Intimate Partner Violence in same sex relationships, I preferred one specific type of IPV to be at the center of attention.

⁶ The classification of these products as explained, is to be considered a mere instrument to aid analysis.

⁷ As a formally trained anthropologist, I hope to have the chance to study both IPV representations’ audiences and ways of productions using an in depth ethnographic approach. It would be also interesting to write a virtual ethnography focusing on proactive internet communities involved with IPV, possibly following Donath’s example regarding *Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community* (1999).

Domestic Violence in the Italian Media Landscape

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State Related Advertisements

As one can imagine, state-related advertisements stand out from all the other messages for what is generally considered to be a politically correct approach to the problem.

In the first place this means that, in most cases⁸, the harassment is not directly portrayed. On the contrary, the consequences of violence are usually shown: bruises, scars, wounds combined with psychological grief make the message clear straight away. In addition, for the most part the abused woman is not referred to as jointly responsible for this situation. But even if not openly stated, the message coming from institutional social issue advertisements is one of victim blaming. The reason for this has to do both with the given definition of domestic violence and the abused women's portrait in these ads. Specifically, from the images shown intimate partner violence turns out to be anomalous and unbearable: to quote one of the case studies produced in 2011, "violence against women has no excuse"⁹. On the other side, the pain endured by the victim generally serves as "starting point" for these representations. Whether she reacts by letting the violent man out of her life or by justifying his actions (also stereotyped with silence), it is clear that a pattern of action is defined: a woman who suffers from IPV has to break all the ties that link her to the violent man. This turns out to mean that domestic violence is as unconceivable as the abused woman's silence: in a common view keeping silent means that she "accepts the harassment palely". But this is not the only interpretation suggested by these advertisements: failing to match the institutional answer (namely report or break up) is equaled to being unaware of the gravity of the situation. In particular, one of the case studies analyzed shows the pattern described above: in the 2013 State campaign for domestic violence prevention, the

⁸ This study takes into account also some representations that feature verbal abuse and physical violence: in the 2009 Padua social advertising the main character addresses his own wife with words such as "How do you dress? You must shut up. I am the breadwinner of the family! The only thing you do is playing the flirt with anybody...". Insults of this type are followed by the depiction of physical harm and sexual abuse (Padua Equal opportunity department, 2009). However, it must be recorded that in this section similar examples are not copious.

⁹ The 2011 Equal Opportunities department's advertising shows a woman whose eyes are empty and full of bruises. On her way to work she tries to find a realistic explanation for the marks that a violent man left on her skin. But as the advertising suggests, "domestic violence has no excuse" (Italian Ministry of Equal Opportunities, 2011).

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abused woman is addressed directly and invited to “recognize violence” (Istituto Superiore di Fotografia e Comunicazione Integrata, 2013). In this context, the victim of IPV is presented as a person who lacks consciousness, or even worst, completely passive.

This pattern is also confirmed by the suggested solution: whether the ad calls for a report to the police or for a call to the national antiviolence hotline number 1522, the solution is often proposed in terms of "waking up", "starting to react" or even more commonly "facing the truth".

Furthermore, there is no shortage of sentences that points at the abused women as openly accomplices: in 2012 Campania Region together with Cinema Fiction adopted the slogan “don’t hide yourself, report” (Cinema Fiction, 2012), while the above mentioned 2013 State campaign featured phrases like “There’s only one way to change a violent boyfriend. Change Boyfriend” or “If you know that he will knock you out, don’t open when he knocks at the door” (Istituto Superiore di Fotografia e Comunicazione Integrata, 2013). Statements like these ones show directly how the abused woman cannot escape the social stigma that guilt-trip her. Even more explicit in this sense is the 2009 Padua Equal Opportunities Department’s ad, featuring a male voice warning that: “silence is the problem. Not reporting the abuses equals to a conspiracy of silence” (Padua Equal Opportunities Department, 2009).

If everything described above seems to be at the core of the institutional representations, the violent man’s image lays, paradoxically, in the background. As a consequence of this underrepresentation the focus is shifted away from the offender and the theme of male violence is not correctly considered.

In the end of this short paragraph, one final consideration must be done: even if less attention is paid to the aggressor, this doesn't imply a lack of male presence in these kinds of representations. On the contrary it is very common for State advertisements to feature male participation: whether a voice or a real person, the one who is proposing the solution is often a man¹⁰.

¹⁰Nuovi Orizzonti’s campaign: in the final scene a man invites everybody to “say no to violence against women” (Nuovi orizzonti, 2011). In a similar way, in the State’s 2009 spot “1522”, the voice of a man warns the woman who’s suffering from IPV to face the truth and react (Equal Opportunities Department, 2009).

*Journalistic comprehension*¹¹

In this section few elements¹² of fiction are involved: in journalism what counts the most is taking into consideration real life facts, and the recording of domestic violence news is no exception. What must be considered however, is that none of the messages reported is impartial. Quite the opposite, a cultural positioning can be seen in some recurring points, starting from the image of the abused woman.

It's very popular for these messages to show a redeemed woman, one who has definitely broken with her past and can speak about it while maintaining a suitable distance. Moreover, in these interviews, it is quite evident that previous experiences are also referred to in conformity to a consistent pattern. Specifically, a switch from passive and naïve subject to active and strong person is more than evident. In terms of time one can distinguish a number of phases: at first her will to help a problematic man appears to be dominant, and associations between her role in the relationship and the figure of nurse is not uncommon¹³. This stage is consequently followed by a disillusion that leads the abused subject to "open her eyes". In addition, regardless to the phases, in these kinds of narrations self diminishing words are very popular both towards themselves and their past mistakes: metaphors about situation misunderstanding, confusion, partner submission, disregard for the former husband/boyfriend are just a few examples. More concretely the words of Laura Roveri serve as an example of the above mentioned pattern:

I did not recognize most of the signals. I actually ignored them, somewhat on purpose, specifically because in a sentimental relationship one is not lucid and impartial enough. Later on, I could see everything clearly. From another interview: I met a different person, and now I finally understand the difference between a sick relationship and a healthy one¹⁴.

¹¹ In this section, I chose some of the most recent and popular cases of IPV represented by Italian media. Since the journalistic coverage of domestic violence facts consists in an almost unlimited amount of services, I considered a selection of the cases to be more practical. The list is as it follows: Aprea Rosaria; De Laurentiis Veronica; Orlandi Annalisa; Roveri Laura; Saieva Celeste.

¹² Using the term fiction I hereby refer to documentary dramas which feature re-enactments of actual events.

¹³ When interviewed on the supposed violent behavior of the popular singer Den Harrow, Annalisa defines herself as "driver, mother and in-home nurse" (Le Iene, 2014). In the act of explaining the story with her previous husband, Veronica De Laurentiis appears as a caregiver: "I thought that by loving this man and being always sweet to him, I could have changed his behavior" (Amore Criminale, 2014).

¹⁴ "Molti segnali io non li ho visti, più o meno volontariamente li ho ignorati perché quando si è in una relazione sentimentale non si è sempre lucidi e obbiettivi. [...] A posteriori ho visto tutto più chiaramente" (Tg Verona Telenuovo, 5/6/2014). From another interview: "ho incontrato una persona

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Moreover, as this quote exemplifies, most of the women who have encountered a similar life path show a different attitude towards the present and the future: one of the words that occurs most frequently is "change", clearly stressing the beginning of a new life where there's no place for such mistakes.

In sum the portrait that one gets from journalist representations like these, is that of a brave woman who even through harsh times made up her mind about the partner's violent behavior and decided to distance herself, mainly by using the institutional tool of condemnation.

But this is not the only way in which journalists present women's reactions to intimate partner violence: sporadic cases present a woman openly suffering but not yet ready to conform to the accepted view. This is the time when judgment about both situation and people involved is mostly common, and the words used are ones that point at the lack of something: lack of strength, weakness, unawareness. It must be recorded that in such cases the judging speaker has little or no specialist knowledge of the issue. In its place, journalists tend to speak on behalf of the social morality, thus contributing to the augmentation of the prejudices about the abused woman and her presumed guilt. In this sense a good example is the case of Rosaria Aprea, a beautiful young woman who in 2013 underwent spleen removal surgery as a result of a violent beating at the hands of her partner. When first interviewed the girl stated that she had mixed feelings about what happened and the aggressor. One year later, a journalist from the Italian National Channel Rai told her story from a different point of view:

The story caused quite a stir both because of the forgiveness shown to the tyrant, and the hesitation she had before reporting the fact to the police. Rosaria, like many other women, was weak when faced with the abuse, lacking strength when the moment came to condemn her life partner's actions. [...] Nowadays she has gone over that moment, she is not confused anymore.¹⁵

diversa e finalmente capisco la differenza tra una relazione malata e un amore sano”(Notorious, 6/4/2015).

¹⁵“Una storia che aveva fatto discutere per il perdono che Rosaria aveva concesso al suo aguzzino, per il tentennamento avuto sulla decisione di procedere con una denuncia nei suoi confronti. Rosaria come tante altre donne, fragili davanti alla violenza, senza forza davanti alla scelta di denunciare l'uomo con cui condividono la vita. [...] Oggi Rosaria ha superato quel momento di confusione [...]” (Telegiornale Rai 3, 5/7/2014).

To be fair, not even the portrait of the “brave woman” who reports the harassment is completely freed of judgments: in this sense, a prime example comes from one of the latest episodes of the Italian storytelling program *Storie Maledette*. Broadcast on the 28th of January 2016, this episode hosts Celeste Saieva, a 29 year-old girl condemned for her husband’s murder. The interview is conducted by the Italian journalist Franca Leosini, directly from the prison where Celeste is serving a term of imprisonment. The whole episode is structured as a search for the truth, but what is interesting for this study is the opening dialogue about the abuse she suffered from the now deceased partner¹⁶. Celeste’s narration of the harassment is frequently interrupted by the journalist intervention:

Celeste, everyone of us tends to justifythemselves... But in a relationship neither duties nor faults are one-sided. Do you take on some of the responsibilities for the relationship’s decline?[...]

Listen to me, Celeste... You let him beat you, right? If I were you I would have hit him with a pan... Why did you stay with this man? [...] Why didn’t you leave him?¹⁷

These examples are to demonstrate that, paradoxically, when the abused woman is not blaming herself first, there is someone else that will do that for her.

As far as these representations are concerned as a whole, one must acknowledge that once again little attention is paid to the abuser. The most popular way of dealing with the abuser implies a brief explanation of his acts: be it a description of how he carried out the criminal deed or fact related reasons (such as jealousy and angry outburst), it is always very unsatisfactory¹⁸. Another recurrent trend is the one that implies an in-depth analysis of the specific IPV crime¹⁹: in these cases abusers are usually described as unusual characters, thus confirming the pattern that defines the violent man as an exception.

¹⁶ Celeste repeatedly reported to the police her husband’s violent behavior. Unfortunately, she didn’t manage to achieve any appreciable result.

¹⁷ “Però celeste ognuno di noi tende a farsi il santino eh...Dal momento che in un rapporto di coppia le responsabilità e le colpe in genere non sono mai da un parte sola, lei riconosce a se stessa qualche responsabilità nel deteriorarsi dei rapporti con Michele?” [...] “Senta Celeste, ma lei se le teneva le botte? Perché al di là di dargli una bella padellata in testa, cosa che io personalmente avrei fatto, perché lei restava con quest’uomo?” (*Storie maledette*, 2016).

¹⁸ For examples see: Tg Verona Telenuovo (5/6/2014), Telegiornale Rai 3 (5/7/2014).

¹⁹ The television format that implies such “in depth analysis” of known crimes is very popular in Italy. *Amore criminale*, *La vita in diretta*, *Linea Gialla* and *Quarto grado* are just a few examples of the type of programs that host a vision of uniqueness of each IPV crime.

Independent products

This last part is dedicated to the popular imaginary about intimate partner violence and the choices made by the Italian community to stand up against violence towards women. Before analyzing the texts, I would like to stress that the producers belong to the more diverse sections of society: from high school students to YouTubers and private associations, there are many people involved. In addition, it is also useful to note that since these kinds of representation suffer no sort of censorship they contain even more perspectives.

This means first that the repertoire of images of the abused women is very wide: there are those who justify their man, those who think that violence is a synonym for jealousy, those who minimize the facts, those who suffer but are afraid to break up, and there are those who, in the end, are pragmatic enough to stop the abuser when he first becomes violent. In spite of the variety of the images however, what each of these representations has in common with the other is that they all refer to the same idea of what is good and what is wrong: the right approach presented is to distance oneself from the violent man. This can be done in various ways, no matter if politically correct or not: suggestions to break up or report the violence²⁰ go with more unconventional proposals about harming the aggressor. An instance of the last trend is the 2014 Calendario delle Studentesse, a calendar where the producers showed an aggressive woman that has no mercy for the abuser, both physically and verbally. In fact the catchphrases that characterize most of the photographs take the shape of a warning if viewed in the overall context: “Wanna



²⁰ To encourage women to report, one of the most spread patterns is the “what would have happened if”. In this sense, a short film called “Anime Brutali” produced in Sicily serves as an example. The first scenes show different forms of domestic violence against women, precisely a man beating his own wife and the murdering of a young girl by her previous boyfriend. The suffering of the two women is represented as the rational consequence of their own behavior: as becomes evident in the final scenes, if they had taken the decision to report, their personal situation would be different now (Cristian Riolo for San Giovanni La Punta, 2012). A similar case is the one produced by high school students in Trentola Ducenta, Campania. In fact, the short film at issue forges two different paths for the girl who is being beaten by her own partner: a rosy future is linked to the decision to report, whereas failure to resort to the criminal justice system’s solution would drive her to death (Liceo Scientifico Luca Giordano, 2013).

fight?”, “No Pity” and “Heels against Hells” are just a few examples (Arakne Communication, 2014).

But even if the existence of this trend cannot be denied, it has not yet overwhelmed the more classical solution linked to condemnation. Actually this last one seems to be the most familiar: the popular imagination is less aware of the help that antiviolence centers can provide. In fact these institutes are hardly mentioned in most of the representations taken into account. This is no surprise considering that the same element is overlooked in many other institutional sources: among the analyzed texts the ones which most frequently mention the governmental antiviolence hotline number (linked, among the others, to local antiviolence centers) are those which in some way are connected with the State. The message spread then don't recommend a simple solution, but what is commonly considered to be *the* solution to the problem. Needless to say, understanding for the abused woman's "silence" has no room in these depictions. In its place copious warnings invite her to do the right thing: if she distances herself from the path described, she becomes, whoever she might be, inevitably guilty.

As far as the man is concerned instead, in these representations the aggressor is generally addressed and pictured as a monster, or more correctly, as a person who deviates from normal standards. Verbally speaking this tendency takes the shape of offenses: in short films such as *Amore Bugiardo*, the aggressor is described as a “shit person, insane and shallow brained” (La Cindina, 2013). A similar attitude is contained in the slogan for the 2013 Yamamay campaign to stop violence against women: “Stop the bastard”(2013).

In terms of images the so called monstrosity of the aggressor gets explained by the visual representation of the brutality of the situation. A good example in this sense is the song called “1522” written and produced by the Punk Rock band No Relax, where blood, wounds, tears, shouts and nonsense violence are essential parts of the whole (No Relax, 2009).



Picture1. Scene from the music video "1522"

But being abnormal, whether depicted as insane, drunken or a drug addict²¹, is no more than a defense that shifts the focus from the real trouble: a sexist behavior.

The Overall Portrait and its Problems

At this point the existing correspondence between popular and governmental views about the issue must be clear. Of course the languages used differ extensively, but the main point is the same. Considering the suffering that intimate partner violence involves, the whole society urges a change: TV programs, social issue advertisements, new sanchormen, everyone wants these women to react.

At first glance these representations seem to help the abused women, but looking further one discovers the related side effects. First they demean mistreated woman, who is portrayed as a weak and irrational subject, deprived of her own agency and will. A second implication of these messages is that they eventually blame the victim herself: this, in my point of view, is a overly easy way of deflecting both criticism and a deep examination of the issue. A third problematic area is the bias of abnormality attached both to women and men involved in intimate partner violence. The reason behind this observation is very simple: the Italian Statistics Institute recorded that more than 6 million Italian women (namely more than 22%) have suffered IPV in their past or present life, whichever the harm might be (ISTAT, 2006). This means that the portrait as it is right now, is not accurate: the seemingly limited domestic violence problem is, in fact, widespread.

Last but not least, as far as the punishment tool is concerned, it is undeniable that reporting IPV crime is quite often shown as the solution, the one that is more likely to change the situation. Furthermore, to report seems to be a simple action. In reality however, this tool is neither easy to rely on nor efficacious as it is showed. Some Italian scholars have already dealt with the problem regarding the availability of the instrument: in 2005 Romito stated that women who try to notify an abuse can possibly “be dissuaded and frightened by the police officers themselves” (Romito, 2005, p.113). In 2009, a study conducted by Danna records a list of improper answers that police officers gave to those women who were looking for help: “quarrels are common to every family, we can’t do anything about that! Don’t worry, it’s normal, everything is going to be alright” (Danna, 2009, p. 16-18). However who manages to report an IPV

²¹ Most of the times he who is committing violence against women has no such problems.

related crime to the police is not, in most cases, consequently done with her problems. Everyday news deal with murders committed after the police was informed about the abuses, and probably a great number of less shocking cases remain hidden.

This means that IPV representations fail, once again, to help abused women's recover.

Hegemonic Discourse: Distinctive Characteristics and Reasons for Prevalence

If one considers the messages as a whole, some recurring points are undeniable. In the matter in question, I hold to be true that these products are born out of an existing social discourse about the IPV issue. As Foucault used to remember, a discourse is a set of socially defined norms establishing who is talking about a certain issue, how, where and when (Foucault, 1972): in this case, those allowed to talk are mistreated subjects that choose to end the abusing relationship. The hegemonic discourse also legitimates to speak non abusing men as well as victim's relatives: the acceptability of their words strictly depends on the message, which must alert society about the right thing to do. In this sense, to report seems the most accepted key to stop the abuse, but public denunciations are welcome as well. The most suitable place where to look for help thus becomes the police station. Nevertheless, mass condemnation regarding IPV also occurs in TV programs, web sites, newspapers. Finally, the perfect timing to report is considered to be after the first time that the partner resorts to violence. However, if these characteristics become visible at a closer look, digging even deeper is possible. In this case, considering that both national media and independent productions hold the same view, one might ask where is the origin of this discourse to be found. One would argue that such characteristics, jointed with music and emphasis on emotions, respond to the so called infotainment logic, that is, presenting information in a way that is meant to be entertaining. To some extent, the entertainment driven nature of both national and non national texts is undeniable: from newscast's announcements to social advertisings and programs such as *Amore criminale*, most of the quoted examples unravel this specific pattern. Moreover, search of potential shares and economic revenues are to be considered as well. This presumed standardization along the recreational patterns of production led to an intense scholarly debate: a great number of works was focused on the interpretation of infotainment as a form of hard news recess, a sort of shifting towards a less objective reporting style of factual news (Loporcaro, 2005 p.20-22).

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According to Delli Carpini and Williams however, the distinction between facts and opinion, and consequently between entertainment and non entertainment media, is purely artificial, an outcome of cultural changes that in the twentieth century led elites to distinguish themselves from the devaluated mass. In this view “public was distinguished from media professionals and policy experts, with the former viewed as passive, easily manipulated consumers of information, and the latter as information gatekeepers who took primary responsibility for determining and representing the public interest” (Delli Carpini et al. (2001p.164-165). Following this historical interpretation, speaking of infotainment in its negative usage would lead to maintain and re produce the objective/subjective truth dualism. Although more and more producers are nowadays interested in infotraining the audience, resorting uniquely to the news deterioration explanation would be misleading. Every representation has a cultural background, and for this reason objective reality and its portrayal should be considered mere constructions. Even if all the analyzed products were to be similarly entertaining in nature, such a feature would be a still more clear demonstration that the distinction between entertainment and non entertainment media is purely artificial. Similar problems are likely to arise if a top down explanation of the commonalities is taken into account: such an interpretation would imply a subtle distinction between active culture creators and passive users, consequently ignoring audience’s agency. As De Certeau stated, consumers’ everyday practices go far beyond mere acceptance of power: they make tactical use of what is imposed (De Certeau, 2001p.63-79). Precisely because I am convinced of the importance of agency, the view that I hold is not one of media products being made to influence society in a single axis relation: to me the explanation is far more complex. To clarify my position, I would resort to a key concept in social sciences, namely the one of social representation. This term, used for the first time in social psychology by Serge Moscovici (1989), is referred to in anthropology as cultural construct, namely a cultural definition of the world intended both to give meaning and understand what surrounds us. Considering this starting point, the recurring characteristics in these texts should be viewed as part of a wider social artifice regarding IPV, both embedded in our culture and embodied in our system of thoughts (Ligi, 2011 p.65).

In a practical way, this means that such representations derive from both learnt social production and individual performance: the social image of the abused woman that we

get to know in our everyday life will influence our personal understanding of the facts regarding IPV. Of course, the way we look at the issue, would subsequently effect our expressions and productions, thus contributing in shaping a never-ending circle.

In a few words, representations regarding IPV are to be considered artificial constructions together with any other cultural form: language, gender, objective truth.

Hidden Outcomes: Consequences of IPV media representations

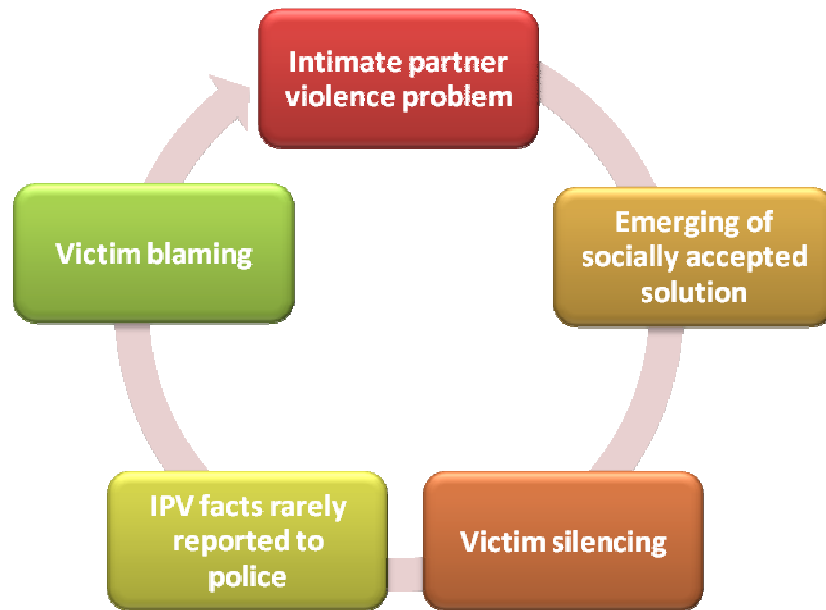
What are the consequences of IPV media representations? In the first instance, social repercussions of such cultural constructions concern the perception of abused women. As humans, we tend to place each new acquaintance in social categories and at the same time we shape our interpretation through them. This means that the stereotyped view of the harassed woman is hard to lose even when getting in contact with her. Moreover, being part of a major context, each and every characteristic described above leads to socially linked implications: in the following part of the paper, I will argue that two major problems are related to the hegemonic discourse²², namely the silencing of victims and the following tendency of speaking on behalf of the abused subject. In chronological order, once the discourse is set, the first consequence concerns the speaking subject: only those reproducing the socially accepted behavior are legitimized to make themselves heard. Different opinions tend to be silenced, whether directly or not. In fact, whenever a woman who is the victim of IPV (but hasn't reported yet) tries to speak, she is immediately held up to public skepticism about her mental health, so that in the end her testimony becomes invalid. Similarly, everyone who doesn't match the socially accepted view is discouraged to speak from the start.

Once the victim is silenced, giving meaning to the silence becomes easy. One of the last national statistics recorded that 93% of women who suffer from IPV don't report their partner's aggressive behavior (ISTAT, 2006). This is largely considered to be both unacceptable and inconceivable, so that in the end some explanation becomes socially required. In a recent past women's silence about IPV was frequently linked to masochism (Romito, 2005, p. 70-72). Nowadays this trend is not over yet, but as many of the cases analyzed above could prove, it's currently popular to link silence to those

²² Part of the hegemonic discourse is also the tendency to analyze each specific case of IPV for its uniqueness, namely what Psychologist Romito called *psicologizzazione*. Giving misleading explanations of the facts leads to a wider misunderstanding of the issue, thus compromising a potential improvement. Under no circumstances domestic violence cases can be considered "unique".

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women's weakness: their state of mind is compromised to such an extent that they cannot see the gravity of the situation clearly. As one can expect, the comprehension of the facts thus described has a weak point: it leads to a vicious circle. If a tool to contrast IPV exists but is not used, those women previously defined as unable to act suddenly become responsible for their own situation, no matter the reasons that are implied in their choice.



Picture2. Vicious circle: a figurative representation.

How to Cope with the Problem

As I have tried to explain at length in this essay, the Italian public opinion (and its media representations) about IPV cause damage to both abused women and society, depriving the two of a deep understanding of the problem. Mistreated subjects are first of all discredited, secondly silenced. As far as society is concerned, however, the main deprivation regards the knowledge about the issue: multiple voices are condemned to stay in the dark, thus compromising research for a more useful tool for coping with the issue of domestic violence. In this sense it is worth quoting Scheper-Huges and Lock's work about disease regarding metaphors: to them, it's very common that

the societal and cultural responses to disease create a second illness in addition to the original affliction, what we are calling the 'double'.[...]The disease and its double force the

patient, now twice victimized, further into the cage of his or her illness: shunned, silenced, and shamed in addition to being very sick (Scheper-Huges, &Lock, 1986, p.137-138).

In this particular case, the “illness” I am referring to is domestic violence, thus a problem that has nothing to do with biology. But as well as the majority of biologically linked illnesses, a double suffering is involved.

I would like to stress the fact that to provide a change, portraying the variety of possible answers combined with a more respectful image of the abused women would certainly help. It happens to be that antiviolence centers are already working in this sense: a good example of a suitable representation is a D.i.Re (*Donne in Rete contro la violenza*) production named “*Spot sociale Antiviolenza*”²³. In this commercial, the abused woman is not victimized, but rather showed on her path towards change: at first she is running away from a violent partner, alone. The abuse she has suffered are displayed by the man’s voice himself: physical and verbal aggressiveness were a large part of her daily routine. On her trip away from home her mind is full of fear: is she going to lose her children? Who would ever believe her if she reports? Where is she going?

But fears don’t last forever. Her life will change when she decides to turn to an antiviolence center, a place where she can speak freely about her trauma without being judged (D.i.Re, 2012).

In such messages the act of listening to the victim is shown as a first step to help those women, thus providing a substitution to the overrated solution regarding the reporting of violence. In fact, if 7% of women who suffer from IPV call for the criminal justice system’s help, this means that only a few subjects feel comfortable with reporting the partner’s abuse. We must all bear in mind that, far from the common imaginary, not all the abused women want to distance themselves from their partner: urging all the subjects who are suffering from IPV to report is tantamount to recommending one solution to all problems. Considering this, the silence about domestic violence problematized for so long by society can be interpreted as a straight answer about the inadequacy of the tool. In this context, IPV portrayals such as the ones

²³ Similarly useful advertisements are the 2015 D.i.Re production named *Le parole per dirlo* (D.i.Re, 2015), and the 2014 *La via d’uscita* (Centro Antiviolenza Donna Abruzzo, 2014). The first one clearly demonstrates a web of women against violence, while the second is focused on a mistreated woman’s path to recover. Of course this and similar representations are a far cry from being perfect. More attention should be paid for example to those women that want to change their lives step by step, in a few words without completely abandoning their previous lifestyle.

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at the core of this study should give way to a more complex representation focusing on the choice of the survivor, one where domestic violence service providers act as counselors. If obtained, such an achievement in the field of media representation would possibly increase the chances of providing help even before an abused subject actually gets in touch with shelter workers: the main support is of course to show different solutions. The second assistance that is supplied is the restoration of the abused women's self image: she is not a passive subject anymore.

The need to change media representation, however, is not the sole point at issue. Since media representation reflects the Italian cultural construction of IPV, it is extremely urgent to spread equal opportunities education programs all over the country, especially in schools. I am firmly convinced that such an approach would help in the search for the deconstruction of harmful stereotypes regarding women, whether they suffer from IPV or not.

Media change alone won't affect society.

Apart from this, however, there is one thing we can be sure of: the time has come to stop blaming the victims and look for a concrete change in the call for non violence.

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