

La complessità del fenomeno della violenza domestica

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Il contrasto alla violenza di genere richiede un approccio integrato, complesso, che tenga conto di una pluralità di sue componenti. Abbiamo voluto parlare di questa complessità della violenza di genere con lo psicologo Marius Raakil, il direttore esecutivo di Alternative to Violence (ATV) in Norvegia, il più antico centro di trattamento europeo per gli uomini che usano la violenza nelle relazioni intime. L'organizzazione è stata fondata nel 1987. Oggi ATV offre servizi di trattamento e assistenza a tutti i membri della famiglia. ATV, inoltre, si sta impegnando in progetti di ricerca sui responsabili, i processi terapeutici e l'esito del trattamento.

Q. World Health Organization has long classified violence as a complex phenomenon that should be treated with an integrated and ecological model of violence. However working in this field we often come up against barriers that see violence as primarily a social problem or primarily a psychological/individual problem. What is your take on the risk of polarization between these aspects?

R. Although we have been working in this field nationally and internationally for nearly 30 years, the polarization is still there and the ongoing debates are continually reflecting this. The knowledge base of today is supporting the World Health Organization's claim that DV is a complicated issue that should be dealt with by integrating various approaches. There is also evidence-based research pointing to the fact that this is a complex issue, so we should be over the idea that this is either a psychological or a social problem. It should be very clear to all of us that it is both. So, there is a big risk for polarization, but at the same time, it should be really clear that it shouldn't be necessary to feed the polarization. It is obvious that in the field of DV there is a social, a psychological, a political and a societal side. We agree that DV is about gender inequality and we agree it is about human rights violation, in the Nordic countries we are also very clear that it is a threat to democracy, on the societal/political level.

In reference to Norway and the Nordic countries and specifically to the organization I represent, Alternatives to Violence (ATV) it has been clear since the start of our work, 30 years ago, that DV is about socially constructed ideas around masculinities, family, gender roles and patriarchy and it also clear it has a psychological side, that is not in opposition to social aspects. In my organization we have been arguing, since the very beginning, that we have to look at the intersection between violence as a social problem and violence as an individual psychological problem. Of course, there is a broad context explaining why there has been a polarization and why it is still present. Depending on what kind of perspective you take, the different emphasis give direction to what we think about the measures and interventions needed. So, of course, if we see DV as primarily a social problem, the basic recipe should be around social change, if it is primarily about psychological aspects, then that would have quite different implications on the kind of measures we should have in place.

The more we think it is a psychological problem, the more we have to think in the direction of psychological treatment. But, to my understanding, it is not difficult to acknowledge domestic violence both as a social and psychological problem and we need to think of measures on both levels. I think this is reflected quite well in the Norwegian way of organizing interventions around the fight against domestic violence.

I also think there is a resistance to change that is linked in different degrees to how societies reflect patriarchal values, like the family. Family is a cornerstone of the structure of most western societies and of most all countries and there is strong idea that family, as an institution, has a very profound value. Domestic violence is threatening the idea that the family is the safest place on hearth, for children and for other family members. This is one of many important factors explaining why it is so difficult to readdress and acknowledge the real magnitude of the problem, recognizing the extent that it actually has.

Q. Has the public discourse changed in your country over the past 15 years, and if so, how? If not, why do you think it hasn't changed?

R. Norway has the same general history regarding domestic violence as most other Western countries. Early on, we did not problematize the issue. It was the normal way of functioning of a more patriarchal society than we have today. It was the grassroots antiviolence, shelter and women's movement that put DV on the agenda also in Norway. It was a very important chapter in the slow change towards addressing domestic violence as a problem the way we do today. In Norway and in the Nordic countries in the last 15 years there have been a growing attention and acknowledgment of DV as a problem to society not just as a social and individual psychological problem, but also as a serious public health concern. And that is the case to a large extent for Norway, Finland, Denmark and for Iceland as well, Sweden is a little bit of a contrast in the Nordic context. In my view Sweden defines domestic violence more as a social problem and less as a health problem in comparison to the other Nordic countries. But, referring to the last 15 years, the Norwegian government has continuously launched and worked on National Action Plans against domestic violence and I think this is reflected in a rising public awareness, also including the different professions and national politics. Activists have not been alone raising awareness, because domestic violence has been quite high on the political agenda of the government and parliament. The attention has echoed on all relevant professions that have been trained on the topic: the police force, the criminal court system, lawyers, social workers, and health workers. Today, there are national guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, that state that all relevant professions are obliged to teach domestic violence, as a part of their basic training. These are just examples of how much Norway has undergone a cultural change. In

Norway, we have recognized that we need an integrated approach to address DV as a profound problem for society and because it is an intersectional issue we need to activate many levels: legal, political, human rights but also gender equality and public health and also social conditions.

Q. As we know violence is often a violation of the criminal code. However in practice the lines are in many cases not so clear-cut. What is your positioning as a psychologist with the inevitable gray areas we must face in working with violence?

R. I think the basis for managing to combine complexity and clarity is a good and solid knowledge base. We need to combine the experience by practitioners with the research from different areas and disciplines: criminology, sociology, psychology and political studies. The main challenge for psychologist and psychology is to highlight that their knowledge is in addition to all the societal factors. Being able to factor different psychological aspects gives us an important access to understanding the diversity of domestic violence. In reference to the criminal code, I also think psychologist should acknowledging that domestic violence is a demonstration of criminal behavior and they need to combine that with a psychological prospective on what may be the pathways of the development of a problem with violence. Psychological prospective should be added to other ones. This has been especially relevant when other systems want to make one-dimensional decisions. For example, there has been a kind of violence by the children's fathers in issues regarding parental visitation rights and separation. The legal rights of the adults should be secondary. In the Nordic countries as representatives of psychologist we have argued that domestic violence is a complex problem in its different forms and there are different kinds of situations of domestic violence, it is not a one-dimensional problem. The Psychologist association in Norway has argued publicly that you always need to assess situations of domestic violence because perpetrators are not all the same and the situations in the family differ in terms of gravity and risk. You have to take those variations into account if we want policies in society to fight domestic violence. And even in the Norwegian context, professional bars of psychology have critical opinions regarding the legal system and it is very important to give a professional contribution. ATV has been representing psychology and psychologist on the issue of DV, so we have raised our voice on the fact that the legal system in Norway is not designed for dealing soundly with domestic violence cases. There are weaknesses because DV is not considered like a criminal offence happening in the public space. Psychologist in Norway are actively expressing their opinion on the need to reform the legal system, in order to be able to do better justice for the victims of domestic violence, also because we know that the conviction rates of perpetrators of domestic violence are still worryingly low. It's important that psychologist engage in the public debate, with a sound professional

basis. But I think we are an important voice in the public debate, because we can represent logical prospective in a different way than other professions.

Q. What do you think the most challenging aspect is of working with violence?

R. It is an important question, but it also is a very general question in reference to psychology and in part also in reference to psychiatry, because a lot of psychologists are working in the field of psychiatry. Regarding psychology the biggest challenge is to establish a sound model of understanding domestic violence in psychological terms. I think very much to this day we have taken parts of different psychological traditions and models and have tried to apply them to domestic violence. But I think we have, in the field of psychology, still a long way to go in order to develop good enough psychological models for understanding the complexity of domestic violence.

But I was bringing psychiatry into this also because, in many countries and at least in Norway, the sector of psychiatry in society is a big one. A lot of resources are being put in psychiatric services, but still the field of psychiatry is struggling with working with domestic violence on its own terms. In the Norwegian debate the problem is that the fundamentals of psychiatry need to identify a diagnosis in order to be able to provide treatment for violence within the psychiatric services. But violence isn't a diagnosis, so the psychiatric system in Norway doesn't have the possibility to work on domestic violence unless they define it in relation to a diagnosis, which may be the case, but it may also not be the case. So there is a the lack of solid basic knowledge among psychologist as a group of professionals and in addition the psychiatric system has structural problems in connection to working with perpetrators and also, to some extent, also to working soundly with adult and child victims, so I think that is one of the central challenges at least in the debate in Norway.

Q. What do you think your personal contribution has been to this field and how would you like your legacy to be taken forward?

R. Do be decently modest, I think my contribution is connected to my decision to spend my professional life as a psychologist working with the perpetrators and the victims of domestic violence. That is what I have been doing for 30 years. I haven't done anything else. My contribution has been to be in an organization representing continuity in our work not just running treatment services but also spending a lot of our resources in trying to develop sound models of interventions including and acknowledging psychology and the importance of psychology. I think my/ATV's legacy has been taken forward in the Norwegian context. An example of this is the fact that the Norwegian psychological association has given the first national prize for psychology to my colleague that started ATV in 1987. The Psychological

associations' argument was that ATV has been in the frontline of making domestic violence also a psychological issue, that it wasn't in the first place. We are very proud of that recognition from the psychological association, that proves to us, we have been doing a decent job of integrating psychological prospective into our work with violence and society. I think our legacy has been that this single organization ATV has been included as one of the key players in the development of services in the Norwegian society for perpetrators and victims and has been included into the government National Action Plan as one of the most central players.

Q. What kind of influence (if any) has working in this field had on your personal life?

In my personal life, I think my father was a very good role model, in addition to being preoccupied with work, he was concerned that his children have a safe childhood and develop good social skills. I was always interested in this field, from when I was a student in psychology. This was a natural aspect of being interested in the psychology of men and of course, I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to be able to work in an organization like ATV on these issues. I think it has influenced me in being highly aware of both violence and more in general harmful process in relationships and injustice in the family structure. It is very important to me, to be an equal and respectful partner in a relationship practicing and demonstrating gender equality in my marriage and in my partnership with my wife. I also think it has made me extremely aware of all faces of violence and it is very important to live a partner life and a family life that is informed by my experience of violence.

Q. What do you think the most important training aspect is for a young psychologist wanting to pursue the work in the field of domestic violence?

R. I think there is a huge problem and I am concerned that we are educating psychologist in most countries without giving them concrete and specialized competences in facing domestic violence, but we know that they are guaranteed to meet both persons that use violence and the victims of violence in their clinical work. So I think it is extremely important that we work on integrating the knowledge and practical clinical skills in the basic training about domestic violence that is not the case today and I think this is extremely worrying.

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