Learning to Disappear. Pedagogies of Self-Negation In Mothers Experiencing Gender-Based Violence

Apprendere a scomparire. Pedagogie della negazione di sé nelle madri vittime di violenza di genere

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ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to highlight the struggle in recognizing the violence reported by women-mothers who are victims of violence participating in the PRIN "Phoenix. A new kind of 'rebirth' for women and children living in conditions of marginalization". This difficulty is attributed here to the sexist process of denying the right to 'be for themselves', which affects women in particular: objectified, women tend to be conceived, and therefore to conceive themselves, as "objects for the other" rather than as "subjects for themselves." As they grow up, they therefore incorporate a view of themselves that is subordinate to the needs of the other-than-themselves. In this way, the perception of the embodied self of female subjects tends to fade, and with it fades the perception of the discomfort and pain of violent dynamics. The emerging educational needs of acquiring self-awareness and redefining the meaning of love implicitly learned are identified, in a process that accompanies emancipation from the existential subordination culturally imposed on women.

Il presente contributo intende problematizzare la difficoltà nel riconoscimento della violenza raccontata dalle donne-madri vittime di violenza partecipanti al PRIN "Phoenix. A new kind of 'rebirth' for women and children living in conditions of marginalization". Tale difficoltà viene qui ricondotta al processo di misconoscimento, di matrice sessista, del diritto ad "essere per sé" che interessa, in modo particolare, i soggetti di genere femminile: oggettualizzate, le donne tendono ad essere concepite, e dunque a concepirsi, come "oggetti per l'altro" piuttosto che come "soggetti per sé". Crescendo, incorporano pertanto una visione di sé subordinata ai bisogni dell'altro-da-sé. In tal modo, la percezione del sé corporeo dei soggetti di genere femminile tende a sfumare, e insieme ad esso sfuma anche la percezione del malessere e del dolore delle dinamiche violente. Vengono identificati, pertanto, i bisogni educativi emergenti dell'acquisizione della consapevolezza di sé e della ridefinizione del significato di amore implicitamente appreso, in un processo di emancipazione dalla subordinazione esistenziale culturalmente imposta alle donne.

KEYWORDS

Gender Pedagogy; Gender Violence; Embodied Self; Self-Awareness
Pedagogia di genere; Violenza di genere; Sé corporeo; Consapevolezza di sé

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Introduction

Violence against women, and in particular intimate partner violence[1] (IPV), is a social phenomenon of global dimension, considered a public health problem, which has its roots in the cultural normalization of gender inequities. This phenomenon has serious repercussions on the physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health of women who undergo it (White *et al.*, 2024), and can have serious consequences on the physical and mental health of the sons and daughters who witness it (Asiedu & Baliki, 2025). This phenomenon, therefore, has a profound impact on women's lives and, in the specific context of this discussion, on the lives of mothers (Broughton, Ford-Gilboe & Varcoe, 2024). Motherhood, in fact, when considered as a specific existential dimension, influences every aspect of women's lives, both in terms of the redefinition of identity (Athan, 2020) and in terms of the orientation of motivations and the perception of one's capacity for action (Jones, 2023). In this sense, it constitutes a condition of existence in relation to which violence takes on specific characteristics: its dynamics aim to undermine the cornerstones of the female subject's self-esteem, including through the systematic delegitimisation of her parenting abilities (Fogarty, Woolhouse, Giallo, Wood, Kaufman & Brown, 2019; Lapierre, 2010).

Although there is growing international attention on the phenomenon, and in particular on its origins, its repercussions and the legislative measures introduced to combat it, there are still few studies that start from the testimonies of survivor women to understand their real needs and work operationally to respond to them (Ncanywa, Hassem & Amone-P'Olak, 2024). Specifically, there is a lack of pedagogical studies that examine the epistemic assumptions acquired over the course of a lifetime that lead women—and especially women who are victims of violence—to normalize subordination to the point of accepting it as the sole existential condition within which the possibility of defining themselves and taking action is conceived and perceived.

As part of a broader national research project on the conditions of extreme marginalization experienced by mothers (Lopez, 2026), this article is based on a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) conducted on autobiographical interviews with mothers who are victims of violence. Drawing on the broader analysis (Lopez, Altamura, Disalvo & Padalino, 2026), this study isolates and critically examines the theme of the *introjection of existential subalternity*, using it as a lens through which to explore the experiences of self-negation recounted by mothers who are victims of violence.

1. Subordination as a Space for Feminine Thought: Brief Theoretical Notes

The focus of this discussion is therefore the existential subordination experienced and narrated by the respondents, which they themselves recognized as such at the time of the interview. To clarify the theoretical framework regarding the identified theme, the following section will briefly outline two key concepts that contribute to its meaning: the concept of the "androcentric unconscious" and that of "objectification," highlighting how they contribute to shaping the self-image and self-perception of female subjects.

According to the structuralist constructivist perspective, the learning of subordination – in the specific case of women – occurs in a latent manner, through the unconscious absorption of what Pierre Bourdieu (1988) termed the "androcentric unconscious". This is a social reality's interpretive framework that is essentially binary, with its foundational conceptual core being the *opposition* between bodies—and thus between the sexes, male and female. This framework, acquired through cultural assumptions and applied indiscriminately by both men and women, conceives of the biological difference between the male and

1 The World Health Organization defines IPV as follows: "Intimate partner violence refers to violent behavior committed by an intimate partner or ex-partners that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical assault, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors". Retrieved April 10, 2026, from Violence against women.

female body in oppositional terms and uses it as the basis for justifying – which then becomes logically necessary – the differences between men and women in terms of appearance, characteristics, behaviour and roles. This is a "naturalized social construct" (Ivi, p. 32), based on a "system of homologous oppositions" (Ivi, p. 15), which not only shapes representations of masculinity and femininity but also profoundly influences the cognitive frameworks used to make sense of reality and define one's identity (Bem, 1981). The way in which men and women perceive themselves and one another, therefore, is the result of a "somatization of social relationships of domination" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 33): through the widespread and constant socialization of these opposing differences, distinctly different cognitive and behavioral patterns are constructed for men and women. Once established, these habits shape our conception and perception of reality and its objects, determining what is considered 'normal' or 'abnormal'. The social narrative surrounding gender in polarised terms thus influences, reflects and expresses the epistemic frameworks that guide individuals' conceptions, decisions and life choices (Connell, 2006; Butler, 2013), from a very early age and throughout the course of life (Biemmi & Leonelli, 2016; Lopez, 2015; 2018; 2025).

Intertwined with the issues described above are those related to the objectification of the female body, which Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) describe as the acculturation process that leads girls and women to internalize the observer's perspective – that is, the objectifying perspective – as the primary way they view themselves and their own bodies. This perspective views women as objects and thus assigns value to them based on the intended "use" or "consumption" of their bodies. In line with the androcentric perspective outlined above, and as demonstrated by recent neuroscientific studies (Vaes, Cristoforetti, Ruzzante, Cogoni & Mazza, 2019), in the collective imagination – both male and female – the female body tends to be conceived as an object, and is therefore perceived and evaluated as a 'thing-that-serves' to satisfy the needs of the other. In this largely implicit conception, women are 'made for the other', and their specific possibilities for self-realisation tend to be confined to the roles of partner (preferably wife) and mother (bell hooks, 2022; Melandri, 2025; Rich, 1976)[2]. Female behaviour therefore tends to be evaluated, by both men and women, as all the more natural and acceptable the more it demonstrates devotion to caring for people, and in particular for those they love. Love which, in this sense, as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Elena Giannini Belotti (1972) have already highlighted, and as demonstrated by the most recent national reports on the subject (Save the Children, 2024; 2026), is still today learned from childhood as synonymous with unconditional devotion, unhesitating self-sacrifice, self-giving and fusion with the beloved, thus exposing individuals to significant risks in terms of abuse, mistreatment and violence in intimate relationships (Melandri, 2011).

In a nutshell, the deeply entrenched substrate of androcentric socio-cultural beliefs can still lead people today to unconsciously structure their cognitive and epistemological frameworks; in the specific case of women, these frameworks tend to be built on a model of subordination. In this way, subordination becomes an existential condition within which some learn to conceive of and think of themselves, sometimes going so far as to normalise the abusive dynamics and violence they endure (Walker, 2006).

Self-negation, in this way, transforms from an unconsciously acquired learning into an implemented survival strategy, aimed at explaining the abuses suffered, managing violent dynamics, and silencing the suffering experienced.

2 This implicit stereotype has an impact on various aspects of women's lives. Recent studies, for example, show that the roles 'naturally' associated with women relate to caregiving tasks, particularly in countries where there is a high level of occupational gender segregation (Hsu, Badura, Newman & Speach, 2021).

2. Contextual Elements and Methodological Approach to Narratives

The topic of this study was identified as part of a broader analysis of autobiographical interviews conducted with mothers who are victims of violence by the research unit of the University of Foggia within the framework of the participatory action research project PRIN PNRR "Phoenix" (Lopez, 2026)[3]. The two-year project began in November 2023 and concluded in February 2026. The project's aim was to actively support women who are mothers and victims of violence in developing a plan for an independent and self-sufficient life and in safeguarding their role as parents. The main research problem identified concerned the difficulty faced by women who are victims of violence – and particularly by women with children – in taking the necessary steps both to escape the situation of violence and to reimagine an active, independent, and self-sufficient life path after leaving it.

All participants, recruited using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling method, chose to take part in the study voluntarily after being informed of the interview's content. The interviews were conducted between May and September 2024 with a total sample of 22 participants aged between 30 and 55. At the time of the interview, all of them had at least one minor child. Of the total number of participants, 18 are Italian, 3 are Romanian, and 1 is Albanian. Regarding educational attainment, 9 of them reported having a middle school diploma, 7 a high school diploma, and 6 a college degree.

The data were collected through semi-structured autobiographical interviews. These were deemed the most appropriate method for achieving both the heuristic and educational objectives of the research project, since, by stimulating narrative thinking (Bruner, 1988), they allow for the transformative potential of self-narration to be harnessed (Demetrio, 1996).

The narrative data collected were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)[4] with the aid of the NVivo 15 analysis software. The analysis involved the researchers' active and conscious engagement with their theoretical and epistemological perspectives during the data processing. The themes, therefore, were actively constructed through a consciously guided interpretation process. The semantic coherence of the constructed themes was verified through discussion with the participants themselves.

All the experiences gathered highlight the strength that the women interviewed – despite the cognitive habits they had implicitly learned and unconsciously reproduced – mustered to fight back and break free from abusive cycles. Re-learning to think, and to think of oneself, is never a simple matter: it involves a radical questioning of the basic cognitive assumptions in which all the processes of signification adopted to make sense of the world and one's own existence are rooted. For these reasons, the following aims to highlight the experiences of subordination that the interviewees recognized as such, presenting them as clear evidence of the enormous strength they possessed in embarking on the path to escape.

3. Narrated Subordination: Between Experiences and Constructions of Meaning

The analysis of the interviews led to the development of a comprehensive set of themes deemed significant, from a pedagogical perspective, for the research group. Among others, it was possible to identify the theme "Internalization of existential subalternity." This theme, which falls under the research area "Experiences of violence and related awareness," encompasses the various ways in which the participants described hav-

3 Due to space limitation, this section includes only the information necessary to provide context for the interviews conducted with mothers who are victims of violence. In the specific case of the local unit of Foggia, the project actually involved various stakeholders in the anti-violence network. Full details are available in the anthology edited by Anna Grazia Lopez (2026).

4 The data analysis was carried out in accordance with the six stages identified by Braun and Clarke (2021): 1) familiarisation with the data; 2) initial coding; 3) generation of initial themes; 4) review and development of the themes; 5) definition and naming of the themes; 6) writing of the report.

ing lived through and coped with their experiences of violence. Among these, it was possible to identify the common factor of the internalization of existential subordination as a pre-existing condition or one acquired through experiences of violence. This topic serves as a useful interpretative framework for understanding the processes through which subordination is learned, processes that may particularly affect women, specifically in contexts of domestic abuse. The subthemes related to the identified theme are: *Normalization of violence*; *Justification of violence and/or the perpetrator*; *Self-blame*; *Colonization of the self*; *Annihilation*.

In recounting their experiences, the participants spoke of a tendency to *normalize violence* and fail to recognize it as such. This lack of recognition is experienced – and, at the time of the interview, acknowledged by many of them – as one of the factors that have led them to remain in a position of subordination. Below are some particularly insightful excerpts[5]:

> Int. 1: [… violence] is the norm, so you are unable to even describe it: you don't experience it. I didn't experience it; I didn't perceive those things as violence.

> Int. 5: Me?... I never saw it as violence.

> Int. 6: The first signs were already there when we first met [...], when we were engaged, but I didn't pay any attention to them. […] One day, after an argument, he left me on the [...] highway.

> Int. 8: […] he... um... let's say... before, he hadn't... lashed out the way he did on the last day. Yeah, shoving, twisting my hand, yeah... let's just say I put up with that kind of thing; let's say that... even though it was intense, I put up with it.

It is worth noting that some of them attributed the underlying reason for the normalization of violence to their own lifestyle habits (Int. 9) or to the patterns they had adopted (Int. 12):

> Int. 9: Now it all seems… strange to me, in the sense that: how… how did I manage to put up with it for so long? Because even the psychological aspect – which, unlike the physical one, happens every day… I don't know, you get used to it, you stay, it seems like a normal life to you […]. It all seems normal to you. Because that's the life you've led. It doesn't seem like something… bad to you.

> Int. 12: […] I come from a somewhat backward family: I was raised by my mother, and my father was also very strict. My mother was even a bit violent, because [discipline] was very… you had to slap them, you had to… so I grew up in that environment. To me, it was normal; I justified it; to me, it was just the way things were.

Accounts of normalization were often accompanied by accounts *Justifying the perpetrator and/or the violence* suffered. These justifications were sometimes described as having been considered valid in the past but no longer recognized as such. In other cases, however, they were still considered valid at the time of the interview, as in the following example:

> Int. 14: Even today […] I put my trust in him […], I've forgiven him so many times. I put my trust in him because I saw him cry; I saw him completely break down. But as for me having to say today, a year after filing the complaint, "Yes, he's changed" – no. Because no one can guarantee that to me yet, because I still don't see the money, I still don't fully understand how much he earns each day, and I still struggle to put food on the table for my children […].

5 All quotations originally in Italian were translated into English by the author and checked for accuracy.

Self-blame is also a recurring theme in many of the accounts presented. Int. 19 speaks very clearly about the close intertwining of normalization, justification, and self-blame. In recounting the violence she has suffered (and continues to suffer) and her way of reacting to it, she describes a genuine cognitive habit of blaming herself for the abuser's behavior:

> Int. 19: Even today, he still very often acts aggressively toward me. […] You never really get past it, […] in the sense that in your head, these behaviors always seem, in quotation marks, "normal" or "justified." You say: "Oh well, but that's just how he is." "Oh well, but that's the situation, it's understandable." "Oh well, but maybe I could have avoided this…" And you always tend to… […put the] blame on yourself. Even today, unfortunately, I still do this […]. Because rationally, you realize you're not to blame for anything. I mean, it's more of an unconscious thing that, unfortunately, over time, sticks with you. But rationally, you know that person is sick – they have issues – and that it's not your fault; it doesn't depend on you. If you ask me, "When was the moment you realized that [what you were experiencing was violence]?", perhaps […] never, not even now, I would answer. It's mostly others who start to open your eyes, but in your subconscious […] you never really open them. You always tend to justify it, unfortunately…

Additional experiences related to the theme of the internalization of subordination were those categorized as *Colonization of the self* by the abuser. The women interviewed reported that they had come to lose themselves, to no longer recognize themselves (physically and/or in terms of personality) because the abusers "get inside your head" (Int. 5). Below are some particularly illustrative excerpts:

> Int. 1: I completely changed myself – I mean, he turned me into exactly what he wanted me to be.

> Int. 3: […] you completely lose yourself; you're nobody anymore. So you don't have any thoughts, you don't have… you're nobody anymore. You no longer have an identity.

> Int. 6: Because, anyway, he had reduced me to a, a shell of a person […]. So let's say I went through a pretty tough journey because […] I looked in the mirror but didn't recognize myself.

Finally, under the subtheme of *Annihilation*, it was possible to categorize all the experiences the interviewees described in terms of self-abandonment and unconditional acceptance of the violence they had suffered. These experiences, filled with pain yet also with a desire for justice, reveal the most pernicious aspect of the internalization of subordination. Below are some excerpts:

> Int. 3: I just let myself go. "Maybe that's how it's supposed to be." I even half-convinced myself, "Maybe that's it. Maybe I was wrong before." So everything just went a little… a little like that.

> Int. 13: […]. I even came to believe that death was the solution to ending it all.

> Int. 22: […] I had gotten so sick that I'd lost 25 kg; I'd gotten down to 48 kg. I wasn't there – basically, I wasn't there; I was a blob. I had completely shut myself off from the world; I didn't talk to anyone, I didn't eat – I was a robot. I'd wake up, do the bare minimum of household chores, go to work, come home, cook. I was a robot.

4. (Un)conclusion: some pedagogical perspectives

From a pedagogical perspective, it seems possible to identify, in the accounts of the internalisation of subordination presented here, the characteristics of the dynamics of oppression described by Paulo Freire

(1968) and revisited by bell hooks (2020). Indeed, these narratives, which on the one hand provided a valuable opportunity for the research group to understand the processes through which women internalise and incorporate subordinating perspectives, and on the other hand – and particularly by virtue of the potentially transformative value recognised by bell hooks (2020) in the narration of subalternity – have made it possible to collect valuable testimonies that will hopefully serve to foster awareness regarding the issues surrounding the condition of subordination experienced by women.

The mothers participating in the research activities, in fact, shared their stories as testimonies to the process of internalising culturally imposed subordination. The narratives collected enable us to reflect on the socio-cultural assumptions that lead women to adopt behaviours that normalise suffering and disregard their own needs in favour of those of others. Learning to deny oneself as a self-determined and desiring subject can lead, as the testimonies demonstrate, to a failure to recognise one's own needs and necessities to the point of silencing one's suffering and accepting pain as fate. In particular, the cultural factor that characterises the female gender scripts described and the strategies for managing the violence suffered is identified in the learning of self-denial. In a nutshell, of the issues that have emerged, two particularly salient ones from a pedagogical point of view are highlighted here.

The first issue concerns social responsibility in nurturing the cultural roots from which the process of the subjugation of women stems: as we have attempted to highlight, the internalisation of subordination as a condition of existence is learnt, largely implicitly, through social relationships, establishing itself as a cognitive framework for attributing meaning and transforming into an interpretative lens through which to attribute value to oneself and meaning to reality.

The second issue, which is closely linked to the first, concerns the educational responsibility to take action to prevent the tendency among women to normalise – and thus tolerate – various forms of pain and violence, within a mindset that views the subjugation of the self to the other as the only possible expression of love. In this regard, it is essential to take preventive action. One tool of proven effectiveness, as recent studies (Bonvini & Demozzi, 2024) attest, is Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) (UNESCO, 2018). Implementable in both formal and non-formal educational settings and starting from childhood, the CSE curriculum has been shown to prevent risky sexual and relational behaviours precisely by promoting a critical and holistic awareness of oneself and one's body, thereby also contributing to the prevention of gender-based violence.

In conclusion, disseminating the narratives gathered during the research activities forms part of a stated and agreed commitment of a human, social and pedagogical nature, aimed at giving a voice and visibility to the women who took part in the research. The participants' testimonies serve, in fact, as educational and transformative material, primarily in relation to the socio-cultural underpinnings that permeate the collective unconscious and the social order. On the one hand, because they strike at the heart of the collective epistemic assumptions used to explain and justify gender differences, raising questions regarding the practical feasibility of social justice. On the other hand, because they compel us to reflect on the fact that cultural gender implicatures, even today, often prove to be sexist in nature and permeate relationships, particularly romantic ones. In this sense, the life experiences of women who have found the strength to break free from the self-destructive cycle of gender-based violence prompt us to question the ways in which cultural assumptions continue to operate and perpetuate themselves, sometimes in a far less obvious manner than in the past.

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