



Verso una formazione *lifelong* e *lifewide* per prevenire la violenza di genere a scuola e in famiglia Towards lifelong and lifewide education to prevent gender-based violence at school and in the family

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women has reached a level of diffusion and pervasiveness in all social classes and age groups that requires a plurality of multidisciplinary interventions as well as a true “cultural revolution” to bring out and remove submerged but still existing sexist and patriarchal aspects in our culture.

From an educational point of view, it is necessary to think, from very early childhood, about educating to respect and gender equality, which implies rethinking the initial and in-service training of all those who work in educational institutions and schools. At the same time, it is also necessary to work with families who, from birth, transmit different principles, values and styles of behaviour based on sexual difference.

The contribution will attempt to highlight the urgency of a training-transformation starting with education professionals but extended to all citizens and female citizens, because the processes of education and socialisation to gender take place in all contexts.

KEYWORDS:

**Prevention, gender-based violence, stereotypes, lifelong learning, teachers
Prevenzione, violenza di genere, stereotipi, lifelong learning, insegnanti**

La violenza sulle donne ha raggiunto un livello di diffusione e pervasività in tutti i ceti sociali e in tutte le fasce di età, tale da richiedere una pluralità di interventi multidisciplinari oltre ad una vera e propria “rivoluzione culturale”, per far emergere e rimuovere aspetti sessisti e patriarcali sommersi ma ancora esistenti nella nostra cultura.

Da un punto di vista educativo, è necessario pensare, fin dalla primissima infanzia, ad educare al rispetto e alla parità tra i generi, questo implica ripensare alla formazione iniziale e in servizio di tutti coloro che lavorano nelle istituzioni educative e nella scuola. Nello stesso tempo, occorre anche lavorare con le famiglie che, sin dalla nascita, trasmettono principi, valori e stili di comportamento diversificati in base alla differenza sessuale.

Il contributo cercherà di evidenziare l'urgenza di una formazione-trasformazione a partire dai professionisti dell'educazione ma estesa a tutti i cittadini ed a tutte le cittadine, perché i processi di educazione e socializzazione al genere avvengono in tutti i contesti.

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1. Gender-based violence as a pervasive structural-cultural phenomenon

Human history is dramatically studded with episodes of violence against women, particularly women's bodies. Just think of the myth of the Rape of the Sabine Women, abductions and sexual violence on indigenous women by conquerors, war rapes in the past as well as today, as well as the annihilation of bodies through selective abortions and the killing of newborn girls immediately after birth (Ottaviano, Mentasti, 2015).

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, defined the female sex as the “second sex” precisely to emphasise the “almost natural” presumed inferiority of women, which is actually a social-cultural construction and as such can be transformed through the redefinition of relations between men and women (Connell, 2006).

What is alarming today is the number and frequency of the number of murders of women, by men (mostly husbands or ex-husbands, partners, lovers), in most cases following the end of the relationship or the woman's rejection.

The emancipatory processes that took place in the last century, so much so as to be called the “century of women”, (Ulivieri, 2014, p. 9) have evidently not been sufficient to eliminate any residual of patriarchal and sexist culture and to trigger a profound cultural change, since remnants of a macho patriarchal culture remain today.

The data on gender-based violence today and inequalities in the economic and employment spheres are seriously worrying and reveal the presence of strongly rooted sexist cultural legacies even in supposedly democratic, progressive and equal Western cultures. Worldwide, every year, some 245 million women and girls aged 15 and over suffer physical and/or sexual violence from intimate partners. Italy is among the five European countries with the highest number of women killed, ranking fourth after Germany, France, Great Britain and is followed by Spain (UN Drugs and crime, 2023).

In Italy, the number of women victims of femicide in 2023 was 120, continuing a trend of more than 100 annual homicides in family or intimate contexts since 2020 (ISTAT, 2024).

The legislative progress aimed at safeguarding vulnerable persons sees in the Istanbul Convention of 2011 the forerunner in the recognition of gender-based violence as a violation of human rights, which, in the Italian legal system, reached its enforcement effectiveness with the introduction of the legislation now known as the “Red Code”.

With regard to the crimes introduced by the “Red Code” (Law No. 69 of 19 July 2019), the incidence of female victims varied from 65% to 96% between 2019 and 2022.

Although punitive measures are essential, the tightening of penalties has only a partial deflating effect on the crimes committed. On the contrary, it is necessary to transform certain aspects of the culture in which we are immersed and which we continue to transmit to the younger generations, based on equal recognition of the rights of men and women in every sphere of private and social life (Lipperini, Murgia, 2013). The apparent equality also guaranteed by the Constitution is often masked by conditioning and stereotypes that see a single male model characterised by virility. This concept indicates a symbolic system that delimits and conditions being a man in a specific society, as well as the way in which this condition is (and must be) experienced. One therefore becomes a man only by coming to terms with manhood, by finding one's own positioning in relation to it (Burgio, 2020). In other words, it is not possible to become a man by disregarding the symbolic system constituted by virility, by ignoring it or - even - by ignoring its existence, at least in the West. Indeed, masculinity is perceived as an “abstract political ideal that has profoundly marked the languages, images, and behaviour of concrete male subjects for over a century” (Bellassai, 2011, p.9), to the point of being able to outline the multiple connections between political, social and cultural history for a gendered history of power in contemporary Italy.

Gender-based violence is also defined as structural precisely because it is rooted in the structural economic and social inequalities of this society and continues to be nurtured by them. It is almost always women who pay first, and most violently, for the effects of economic crises, labour market restructuring, and unemployment. In 2020 during the pandemic 101,000 jobs were lost in Italy. 98% of these, almost 99,000, were of female workers.

If on the one hand it is essential to act on women to increase their awareness and their sense of empowerment to put them in a position to be able to ask for help before it is too late (Dato, De Serio, Lopez, 2009), it is equally essential to act in primary prevention on the entire population to help them recognise the first warning signs and above all to invest in the training of boys, future men, to be able to offer them different alternative models of being men through education in respect, affectivity, knowing how to manage loss, the sense of abandonment and anger (Deiana, Greco, 2012; Ciccone, 2009).

Education has the power to transmit to citizens their dominant culture but at the same time it questions, criticises and seeks to transform the widespread culture, it can open up other horizons thanks to its utopian dimension.

2. Towards a cultural revolution starting to education

One of the challenges, still to be addressed, concerns precisely the symbolic dimension of patriarchal violence as a social, educational and cultural problem, i.e. the explication of the ordinary assumptions of everyday life in which institutionalised systemic sexism remains and is not recognised as such. There are still many sexist legacies in the widespread culture, more or less explicit, such as encouragements to engage in different activities for males and females starting with the family (Gianini Belotti, 1973; Casalini, 2011), disciplinary contents transmitted at school that mark an alleged female inferiority or simply maintain female invisibility and absence from knowledge (Mapelli, 2001; Biemmi, 2018; Guerrini, 2017; Lopez, 2017), obsolete and stereotyped male and female models in the media and through advertising (Romanazzi, Farina, 2020; Zanardo, 2010, Leach, 2006; Kane, 2013).

When the contemporary feminist movement was at its peak, sexist prejudices in children's books were criticised and books for 'free children' were written. As bell hooks (2021) reminds us, when we stopped being critically vigilant, sexism began to reappear. Children's literature is one of the crucial sites for feminist education in critical consciousness precisely because ideas and identities are still being formed. Parents and relatives tend to encourage boys and girls to conform to the roles associated by society with their gender and to discourage any behaviour as belonging to the opposite gender. These differential parental reinforcements concern different dimensions from the choice of games to accepted or discouraged emotions ('don't cry you're a little man'), to manifestations of female dependency versus male independence (Abbatecola, Stagi, 2017).

The most difficult objective is precisely that of reaching the entire population (parents, grandparents, workers in any sector, managers of TV programmes and web pages...) in order to make everyone aware of how much implicit discriminatory conditioning exists in the widespread culture that we pass on both informally and through school culture, from generation to generation, and to be able to trigger a change in relationships, language, teaching methods and content, television programming, and advertising.

As bell hooks (2021) writes, in order to defeat patriarchal violence, it is necessary for everyone, including mothers, to be involved in a process of change because this form of violence is sometimes exercised within the family by fathers and mothers towards children, who thus grow up in a climate of authoritarianism, possession and self-assertion through violence.

The effects of these asymmetrical relationships and female subalternity, in addition to the most striking and dramatic forms of violence, are visible in all age groups, starting from birth and childhood (Ulivieri, 1995, 2014; Burgio *et alii*, 2023).

In order to implement the desired changes, a paradigmatic shift must take place aimed at questioning the 'mechanisms' of power that until now have assigned to men a privileged position and dominance over women (Pinto Minerva, 2013). Such a turnaround must necessarily call into play a plurality of social agents willing to dialogue with each other in multiple processes to share ideas, languages, methods and tools to transform the existing (Dello Preite, 2023).

In recent years, there has been no lack of news episodes in which families have opposed through committees and associations to denounce and block authorised projects within schools aimed at educating respect for gender differences. As the sociologist Saraceno pointed out a few years ago, one reaction to complexity may be to affirm a well-defined family model, in which the two genders are assigned different and complementary tasks, denying recognition to any form of cohabitation outside the conjugal family with children. In this case, renaturalising difference allows any possible nuance or deviation from this model to be condemned without appeal because it finds it on the reassuring certainty of the immutability of nature, in practice, it allows inequality to be justified.

Today, gender education paths must inevitably involve families, as well as the entire community, since it is a matter of countering inequalities and discrimination, and this concerns the whole of society. It is a challenging path because it is not a matter of providing knowledge but of developing skills to deal with complexity, starting from the self, illuminating the removed, making categories less rigid and deterministic.

As some results of action-research experiences in 0-6 educational structures show, family participation is a factor that requires a double reflection as it can be interpreted both as a "success factor" and as a "difficulty factor" (Dello Preite, Forni, 2024). The response of families to the territorial educational offer can be very varied and linked to personal factors, with reference to how important they perceive gender-related issues to be.

Certainly, trying to involve a large sample of families would further enrich the current debate and allow for a greater diffusion and reflection on the issues among the population.

3. The importance of continuous gender training for teachers

Despite various investments in society, legislation and research, the problematic nature of violence in general, and gender violence in particular, is that it is intrinsically linked to human beings in different ways and with different characteristics throughout history.

Gender-based violence is widespread among all social classes, in all age groups, levels of education and economic well-being. This dramatic nature forces us to rethink and transform the dominant culture, both at the formal and informal level.

The school is the space deputed par excellence to education and upbringing, from the point of view of educating for differences, its fundamental role is to identify the implicit in the languages and structures of knowledge that continue to propose hierarchical forms of thought and that have always controlled, when not excluded, the production of female forms of thought.

Teachers, from the earliest stages of school education, are called upon to educate respect for various forms of differences, to involve everyone in teaching activities through active-participative methodologies, with the awareness that their intervention is not enough if it is not supported by the work of families and other educational agencies (Guerrini, 2022, 2023).

The awareness of the teacher as a gendered subjectivity, bearer of principles and values that also concern gender, makes it possible to establish an authentic, formative and transformative relationship with their students (Gamberi, Maio, Selmi, 2010). It is therefore necessary to be prepared for a transformative attitude on the part of the teacher, which requires a readiness to review one's own experiences, having become familiar with one's own biography, emotions and knowledge.

As Demozzi and Ghigi (2024) write, a further reason why schools must work to educate for gender equality and against all forms of violence is linked to the formative significance that the body takes on in our lives. The body is one of the main protagonists of contemporary culture; no area of scientific research neglects this aspect and, at least in the social sciences, the idea of being able to produce objective knowledge that is not connected to the body is rejected.

If we consider the body as a social and cultural construct, we cannot disregard its leading role in the relationship between the individual and society, in its power structures. Those who work in schools (headmasters, teachers, educators, cultural mediators...) must be aware that discrimination and inequalities can act on bodies and their differences, also in terms of educational opportunities. The body, in fact, is shaped by the norms, cultural representations, social practices and power dynamics that prevail within the macro and micro contexts it inhabits and by which it is inhabited (Ghigi, Sassatelli, 2018). Dealing with the body, gender education and combating gender violence at school, means promoting a safer and more respectful school environment, educating to relations based on equality. After all, these principles, have been legally enshrined in Article 1 par. 16 of Law 107/2015 entitled *Educating for respect for gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination*. According to the document, such education is connected to the content of all disciplines, with the implication that every teacher contributes to the relational and affective growth of every student.

One of the most widespread difficulties on the part of teachers is the lack of specific preparation to deal with these issues, hence the need for the support of pedagogical and didactic research to offer resources, contents, methodologies and good practices that can help professionals in this complex task. The numerous evidences on the subject show how it is necessary on the one hand to train teachers in reflexivity (Schon, 1993; Mortari, 2009) to critically reread ideas, expectations models that have affected their own training, and this would be opportune already in initial training, on the other hand to try to develop reflexive, linguistic, communicative-relational, planning and didactic-methodological skills, related to the teaching discipline, that allow them to offer the class an open and complex vision of knowledge read through gender difference (Lopez, 2018; Dello Preite, 2019; Guerrini, 2017, 2022).

In addition to the training of individual teachers, it is indispensable, to think of paths of transformation-innovation that involve the entire educational system. Therefore, as far as the school is concerned, it will be necessary to involve the management and the entire organisational system, also considering the repercussions with the non-school with which it collaborates on a daily basis.

In this regard, the training experience carried out through a European project *Developing whole school Gender Equality Charter Marks in order to overcome gender stereotyping in education across Europe*, which involved three countries (England, Italy and Hungary) with three respective Universities (Wolverhampton, Florence and the European University of Budapest) and NGOs (Decsy, Oxfam Italia, Antropolis) and had the overall objective of promoting a radical change in secondary schools to prevent forms of discrimination and gender-based violence, starting with teacher training, appears particularly significant and effective. One of the peculiarities of the project was to use a whole approach, precisely in order to take into consideration and affect every aspect of school life, starting from management and leadership to the families and associations that collaborate with the school coordinating the leadership (Griffin, Rédei, Guerrini, 2021; Rédei, Tsouroufli, 2021).

Through the joint work of university researchers, trainers and a representative sample of secondary school teachers, a "Charter for Gender Equality" tool was produced for use by schools to measure how much schools themselves are doing to prevent discrimination and gender-based violence through their teaching and extra-curricular activities, guidance, language and collaboration with families. At the same time, this tool includes a series of stimuli for reflection, activities and practices that teachers can use or transform for their daily teaching.

From an analysis of the document's structure, the complexity related to gender education and the need for the involvement and continuous training of many social actors (headmasters, teachers, families, educators, extracurricular operators) is evident.

Schools can represent an opportunity for meeting, training and growth for both students and adults, provided that they do not only offer informative paths on gender, but go beyond this to propose instead training paths, which imply, involvement, active participation and transformation of the participants themselves (Ghigi, 2019).

As far as educating the population for the purpose of cultural transformation is concerned, one of the most difficult aspects of educating adults is to be able to reach them: teaching feminist thought and theory to everyone means going beyond the academic context and even beyond the written word. Audio-books, songs, radio and television are all ways to share feminist awareness (bell hooks, 2021, p. 64) as long as there is guided reflection by an experienced person who helps people to become aware of all those submerged aspects of culture, apparently accepted as neutral cultural heritage but which in reality have mostly been elaborated by men and based on an assumed male superiority.

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