

## ‘THE CAROUSEL OF VIOLENCE’: EXPERIENCES OF ABUSED WOMEN

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**Abstract:** *Domestic violence is a phenomenon under expansion and affects women all over the world, irrespective of culture, race, status and education. The aim of this paper is to bring an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women who had been within the cycle of domestic violence for some years, in order to help professionals working in the field develop an increased empathy and knowingness about their situation. The study is of qualitative nature using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on a sample of 10 abused women who were interviewed. This paper reports on one theme, ‘The carousel of violence’ which is described by its sub-themes: ‘I before, I now’, ‘...waiting for that change he was talking about’, ‘living with fear’ and ‘dependency’. Recommendations for specialists working in the field of prevention and intervention of gender based violence are drawn.*

**Key words:** *abuse, domestic violence, interpretative phenomenological analysis.*

### 1. Introduction

Family and gender violence are recognized by the international community to act against fundamental human rights such as safety, dignity, liberty, physical and psychical integrity, which have resulted in a broad range of social policy actions and administrative and financial measures [1]. Romania’s social and welfare strategies were strongly influenced by the European Union’s requirements and standards to take consistent legislative measures based on the principle of zero tolerance towards any form of violence. Hence, the first specific legislative framework for preventing and combating family violence was released in 2003 (Law 217/2003) [2], while an amendment addressing essential gaps such as the

protection order was adopted only about ten years later (Law 25/ 2012) [3]. Alongside legislative measures, an increasing number of services are developed to address this phenomenon. The most recent international statistics, on the violence against women in Europe, carried out on a large scale, by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [4] shows that Romania is placed in the second group: 30% of the women declare to have been affected by physical or sexual violence at some point in life, after 15 years old (which falls under the European average). 77% of the Romanian women think that violence against women is spread and widely spread. 28% of the women know victims of such violence in their circle of relatives and friends.

A recent study carried out by 11 NGO’s

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in Romania, mapping the national situation evidences the existence of: 26 shelters (emergency reception centres); 15 recovery centres, for the victims of family violence; 12 family-violence prevention and combating centres; 8 information and public-awareness centres; 3 family-violence prevention and combating compartments; 2 assistance centres for aggressors; emergency reception centres for minors: 11; maternal centres: 4; 22 social assistance units providing services to victims of domestic violence, too [5].

The study points out that there are no information about the results from working with the victims and about the efficiency of the provided services. The same study concludes that there has not been conducted some specific initial training and that there is provided neither the continuing education/ training, nor professional supervision – of support, for the staff working in the field of domestic violence, despite its being a work that generates secondary traumatization.

The national strategy to prevent and combat family violence, for the period 2013 – 2018, elaborated by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly, identifies as main issues to be approached: the absence of a coherent and functional legislative framework, the absence of uniform working practices, the insufficient development of the services, the lack of specialists and their poor training, as well as the lack of a non-violent culture [5].

## 2. Research design

The method of interpretative phenomenological analysis [6] was chosen for its potential to give voice to women who experienced domestic violence and bring an in-depth understanding of their sense-making of it. According to the author of the method IPA studies are

usually concerned with existential issues such as significant “*life transforming or life threatening*” moments [7, p. 49]. IPA is described by three broad elements: an epistemological position, guidelines for conducting research and a corpus of empirical research [7, p. 40]. The term ‘*interpretative phenomenological analysis*’ signals the dual nature of the approach [6, p. 264]: the phenomenological requirement to understand and ‘*give voice*’, exploring the participant’s inside view on the phenomenon under study, and the interpretative requirement to contextualise and ‘*make sense*’ of these claims from a psychological perspective.

The study group was selected by purposive sampling and consisted in 10 females who had experienced violence within their partnership for at least 2 years. Their age was between 25 and 55 years. In depth semi-structured interviews were carried out.

For validity purposes, an external auditor with expertise in IPA has analysed one transcript and a follow-up interview with one participant was carried out to refine the matrix of themes. The limit is that the findings cannot be extended outside the researched sample.

Out of the larger study, for the purposes of this article only the theme ‘*The carousel of violence*’ will be presented.

## 3. First level of IPA analysis:

### Experiences of abused women

IPA implies a “*double hermeneutic*”: participants making sense of their personal and social world, and the researcher trying to make sense of the participants’ sense-making of their world [8, p. 53]. In line with this, the first level of analysis and reporting gives voice to the participants, while the second level is a discussion of findings in line with the existing literature.

The emerging theme of analysis 'The carousel of violence' is described by four subordinate themes: "I before, I now", "...waiting for that change he was talking about", "living with fear" and "dependency".

### 3.1. "I before, I now"

All study participants feel and declare that their experience as a domestic-violence victim has deeply changed them. Their inner, defining features disappeared, having often turned into their opposites. In all cases, it is about the loss of self-confidence, which leads to the diminution or even loss of autonomy.

*"I was optimistic... very determined... what I felt to be good, was exactly what I did... Now, such a thing vanished without a trace. I depend on my parents' counsel" (Roxana)*

If, before her experience as a victim of violence, Roxana perceived herself as being an optimistic, assertive, determined, person, full of initiative, afterwards, she changed into a fearful, withdrawn, isolated and lonely person.

*"I've turned into a shy person and I used to be such a bold and high-spirited being; I knew to be assertive... now I'm afraid to say what I think, what I feel... lest I be persecuted... I am more quiet and reserved." (Roxana)*

For the women having long lived in a violent environment, this experience leaves deep traces: first of all, the zest for life and the capacity to rejoice vanish. Mariana, for instance, no longer capable to feel and find joy in her own life, has learnt to live rather through her children.

*"I have been no longer joyful, for several years, I neither laugh, nor enjoy anything any longer... I don't know whether I have ever laughed wholeheartedly... I enjoy my children's accomplishments and that's all." (Mariana)*

One's own life becomes empty, devoid of any value and any hope of change; the wounds become permanent.

*"I told you that all this leaves a permanent mark. You can no longer be whole again. No matter how many nice people you meet... you may take out the nails, but the holes will still be there... so it doesn't matter if anything changes in my life... the hole left by the bruises, by the swearing, the offence..." (Mariana)*

Physical violence brings much pain, leaves deep traces, leads to the loss of self-esteem; yet, the hardest thing to bear is one's soul suffering.

*"All those strikes... the pain...you know, that physical pain... It hurts badly; yet you seem to get used... although it dehumanizes you. However, the soul's suffering is the hardest to endure... it cries... as it can no longer bear." (Stela)*

For a large number of participants, the change caused by abuse and violence is experienced, on one hand, as inevitable and, on the other hand, as irreversible. The abuser is seen as the one having determined this change, against the woman's desire and will, who becomes therefore a victim.

*"He stole my youth, my life, my dream... all hope has gone. He... with all he did to me..." (Aura)*

For others, the experience of violence entails disease: both "physical disease" and psychical disease:

*"I think I used to be more peaceful. Now, with marriage, more problems have piled up... medical, psychical problems... I have already told you that all these leave a permanent inner void." (Mariana)*

Depression occurs in most cases.

*"Now, I am no longer up to anything and I think that, even if I were capable, anyway, I no longer feel like doing anything. I am crying all the time, I can barely endure my bone pain, I hardly eat, I*

*awfully lost weight; oh, poor me!...*" (Ileana)

All these engender the feeling that their life has been lost.

*"I want everything back. I want to be as I was, before I had known him."* (Cristina)

### 3.2. "...waiting for that change he was talking about"

Not only a way of being is lost; but, worse, the hope is lost.

*"I used to hope the following day would be better... Now, I lost even that hope..."* (Mariana)

All 10 study participants thought the first beating would also be the last... that every beating would be the last; all the more so, since they were promised to:

*"But he did tell me... he was sorry, he did not know what had happened... he had encountered some problems and he was angry... He promised it would not happen again..."* (Aura)

Each promise marked an effort to overlook and to forget; to think it might be better. And all these only resulted in starting all over again.

*"When I thought it would be better, he hurled himself at me."* (Mariana)

Cristina's words describe this cycle of violence - when an awful, terrible beating was followed by regrets, excuses, promises and entreaties. Forgiveness also brings the hope of saving one's marriage. Only that forgiveness and barely renewed hope were invariably followed by a new violent episode. In time, the relation degrades and the hope vanishes.

*"I used to believe all that, in the beginning. I mean, when everything started; but I no longer do. I forgave him so many times, but he keeps on doing it. He promised he would change, but we fell into a huge trap... we no longer love each other, we no longer feel anything for each other."* (Cristina)

Few women manage to realize, like Cristina, that this cycle of violence is possible, on the other hand, because they continue the relation. Moreover, they even find an explanation for their partner's violent behaviour:

*"I think all these acts of violence continued, because I stuck up for him, waiting for the change he was talking about... he did not see me as a support, but rather as a frustrating source of his decay."* (Cristina)

Nevertheless, she does not find the strength to let go; the alternation between the hope of his change and the painful evidence of his remaining the same, is exhausting and draining.

*"Because this is how I feel... sad... My life has no meaning, no course... For a whole year, I have got nowhere... I kept hoping it would pass, it was only a phase, he would recover... But I cannot even hope any longer. I lost any courage to start all over again. It's too late for me."* (Cristina)

### 3.3. Living with fear

All these 10 women relate how the prevailing feeling, in their life, is fear. Their life is marked by uncertainty: they can be no longer safe; they expect anything to happen, anytime.

*"Yaaa! I'm terrified. Yes... I don't know what awaits me, with him"* (Cristina)

They learn to live in a permanent state of alert, of vigil: they build defence strategies and scenarios, in the hope they will avoid, or at least anticipate the next outburst, the next attack.

*"I am frightened. This is something I cannot control. I have ended in fearing him. Whatever I do, I calculate a lot... long before saying or doing anything. Any action of mine can be taken as its opposite; and the scandal bursts again..."* (Cristina)

The fear is uncontrollable; it becomes permanent:

*"I can no longer sleep, lest he should kill me, as he threatens." (Ileana)*

Not even the state of illness stops one's partner's violence:

*"I'm afraid lest, in these circumstances, given my incapacity to move, he might kill me... I could escape him, when he was drunk...; but, immobilized as I was and under terrible pain, I could not even budge." (Ileana)*

For endless days, for whole years, living under the sign of fear and uncertainty, for one's own life, leads to extreme vulnerability, to the incapacity of making the smallest decision about one's own life; and, eventually, to helplessness and dependency.

*"You are like a defenceless child... alone in this world, where you are vulnerable... where you can no longer live peacefully, as you must be on the lookout, lest something bad should happen" (Cristina)*

### 3.4. Dependency

The main reasons why women cannot distance themselves from the abusive relationship are especially financial and material dependency:

*"...there hasn't been a relationship to speak of for a long time. Like I told you, we only live together. We weren't even able to do more than build a home. To have our house and three children. That's all that ties us together. The children are old enough to understand a divorce... but, without a place to live, separation is practically impossible" (Mariana)*

For each study participant, the time spent in the relation with the abusive partner entailed a diminution of social relations.

On one hand, because of their own shame:

*"In time, I have lost all friends... In the beginning, I was ashamed... that they might have seen or see something... and therefore I did not keep in touch..." (Maria)*

And, on the other hand, because of the partner's tactic to isolate them:

*"...because, every time they wanted to call on me, I knew it would end up bad. He used to tell me: why do you need to lose your time with this one, or the other one... So, in time, I gave up inviting them." (Luiza)*

Shame and fear lead not only to their renouncing their circle of friends, but also to neglecting their own families.

*"He would let me neither receive my folks, nor visit them... And if my parents did come... they rarely came, anyway... it would always end up in scandal... So, better without" (Ioana)*

The isolation, the feeling of helplessness, and the total loss of self-confidence finally lead to one's resignation and incapacity to leave the carousel of violence.

*"I don't know why I have remained bound to him for so long; as even now, at old age, I experience ongoing despair... it's so frustrating..." (Ileana)*

The depression, the loss of any hope and trust in their worthiness of a better life turns them into captives of their own helplessness.

*"Part of me knows what it wants, what it should do... yet, the other part doesn't. I'm afraid... I can't... It's too late for me." (Aura)*

Although the divorce is an option, it is only theoretical. For most women, life displays no options, the horizon narrows to a violent present, which drains all force and crushes all hope, even the power to see oneself in a better future. Devoid of this vision, one finds it impossible to leave the carousel of violence.

*"I kept thinking about divorce... But, then, what shall I do?" (Cristina)*

#### 4. Second level of IPA analysis: Making sense of women's experiences

Domestic violence is a traumatic experience and its negative consequences on both physical and psychological health has led to the description of the *battered women syndrome* [9]. The longer and the more vicious is the situation of violence, the deeper is the trauma, as highlighted by the clear-cut differences described by the study participants, in terms of their state and identity, both previously and subsequently to the abuse. The abuses in series [10], covering a long period, for years on end, as in the case of most women included in this study, lead to chronic trauma, with ravaging, devastating psychological effects, resulting in the loss of one's reason for being. The woman-victim develops defensive behaviours, which render her incapable to tear herself out of the violent relation, developing a traumatic attachment to her aggressor, described in the literature as the *Stockholm syndrome* [9]. The cycle of violence describes the dynamics of the violent relation as going through six phases whom we find in the interviewed women's life experience [11, p. 250, 12, p.67]. The first is the *phase of explosion, outburst*, when an access of physical violence occurs and is experienced with stupor and shock, even when it becomes predictable, in time. The first beating constitutes an autobiographical moment of reference. The second phase, *of remorse*, is the phase when the aggressor promises that such things will never happen again, which engenders hope in the aggressed woman. In the third phase, of *tracking or chase*, if the victim expresses her intension to leave, the aggressor will try hard to "buy" her goodwill, by presents, by an irreproachable, caring and loving behaviour or even by emotional blackmail, helplessness or threats with suicide.

Henceforth the fourth phase, of relaxation, "*honeymoon*" and lull, which nurtures the victim's hopes, over time. Unfortunately, in most cases, the cycle starts all over again, until the victim loses the confidence in herself, in her feelings and her judgment, as encountered in the studied group... see a quote. In the fifth phase, of *expectance*, the aggressor resumes his control and domination over the victim, who is ever weaker in her self-confidence and personal power. The sixth phase, of *aggressiveness accumulation*, leads the rise of the aggressor's inner tension, until the next outburst, when the cycle starts all over again. A compressed version of the cycle of domestic violence is described by Iluţ as a process of three phases: *tension accumulation, explosion and "honeymoon"* [13, p. 161].

All 10 life stories of the women included in this study show their repeatedly going through this cycle, in different versions and with different motivations. If, in some cases, the financial and locative obstacle is brought to the fore; in other cases, the children are in the forefront. On the inner level, women encounter confusion, depression, pain, devastation, lack of confidence both in oneself and in the others' help [14]. The affective dependence on the aggressor, documented in the literature, the need for love and the hope that, one day, the abuse will stop are, for some women, the incentive to go on. Studies show that, on average, women leave an abusive relationship and return to their partner about five times before they give up the violent partner [11]. In spite of their suffering, most women find it hard, even impossible to give up the initial commitment. This is identified and expressed by N. Gueguen: "...there are, within ourselves, some commitment processes, whom we can barely interrupt" [15, p. 159]. All these aspects must be understood in relation to the learning

model of helplessness, depression, as well as of the affective and behavioural characteristics generated by the cumulative exposure to violent treatments in the relation with one's partner. Gradually, fear comes to dominate their life and actions; and it will lead to dismantling the self-confidence and the vision of the world, nurtured by the woman so far [16]. The women's getting out of this situation is nearly impossible, as they fear the violence directed both to themselves and to other family members, or they do not benefit from community support

As regards the social support services for abused women, the study [5] shows that 74% of the women knew no professional-support service; only 17% of the respondents resorted to police, after the most severe violence incident, ever undergone; and only 1%, to the social services, as against the European average of 33%, in terms of appeal to police and support services.

## 5. Conclusions

The experience of violence determines the significant decrease in the feeling of one's personal control; the dissolution, up to disappearance, of one's self-esteem, which has, as a last effect, the incapacity to detach oneself from the violent husband. The total lack of trust, hope, of the feeling that they deserve another life encloses them in the circle of violence. "The victim's helplessness and her feeling that nothing can be done to change her situation, transgresses the social barrier between a professional and a beneficiary; and stirs in professionals, the same feeling of fatigue and helplessness" [11, p. 71]. Consequently, professionals have to gain the kind of in-depth understanding of the victims' experiences and their sense-making of it described in this article in order to increase their emotional capacity,

empathy and ability to connect at a deeper level with then victims to offer trust and long-term sustainable support. These are premises for better interventions and should encourage abused women to seek out for support.

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