

## **Comment on the article ‘A real man or really a man? What contribution is needed today for the primary prevention of gender-based violence and to support the mental health of children, adolescents and men’**

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I am writing this commentary on Alberto Pellai’s interesting article on a day in late November, close to the date of the 25<sup>th</sup>, the international day for the elimination of violence against women. We are approaching this date as a community in a painful way, with the awareness that the actions taken so far have been totally insufficient to provide an answer to a problem which continues to increase in its dimensions and affects us in an increasingly evident manner. The news events we all too often stumble upon remind us of this in a stark way and force us to think about what we see happening. That is why Alberto Pellai’s article has often come back to my mind in recent weeks and has accompanied my reflections and considerations not only on what is happening within the walls of the practice where I have the opportunity to meet my patients, but also outside, by observing what produces the particular web of social and relational scenarios in which we are all ensconced.

What I found interesting was the observation point from which proposals for preventing the phenomenon of gender-based violence have emerged. I think it necessary to emphasise, as the article did, that the preventive interventions currently formulated for educational contexts (but also those addressed to the community and conveyed through the media) include actions aimed at warning the feminine who is averse to leaving the dimension of fragility and vulnerability *vis-à-vis* a threatening and dangerous masculine. Actions of ‘warning’ are certainly useful in order to identify the initial signs of a violent relationship, but they do not seem to be sufficient on their own precisely because they do not facilitate the process of changing one’s outlook on gender roles within the couple. I believe that a change of

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perspective on the phenomenon may be useful, leading us to acknowledge the damage that the culture in which we are immersed produces on the feminine and the masculine, constricting them into roles that do not re-establish their complexity and emotional needs. In this regard, in his article Pellai clearly points out the transition from the assignment of the male gender role to the inhibition of the emotional expression of content, considered threatening because it belongs to the feminine. Often when faced with the numerous news reports of aggression or violence within a relationship, I have wondered whether the astonishment expressed by the family and by the social context in which the perpetrator moved, was authentic or not. I believe that the idea of a false Self, constructed on the basis of gender-determined social expectations, may well explain the difficulty of seeing in the other person the nuclei of suffering, psychological pain and inability to experience frustrations because these simply cannot be shared. If the expression of sadness, of despair over an abandonment, makes a man less masculine, this becomes a threat and results in a lack of recognition of the other. Basically, I have the feeling that in trying to raise men and women who fit their gender roles well, we are raising children whose disappointments and sufferings, desires and needs we are not really aware of.

The author effectively notes that men may struggle with the idea of accessing a care space because they believe that psychological care is a feminine environment in which women operate with a range of tools related to the expression and knowledge of their emotional and therefore feminine selves. This hypothesis finds a counterpart in the clear majority of female colleagues who enrol in the Faculty of Psychology and then work in the clinical environment. If, on the one hand, there is the masculine who is only legitimised to express anger, on the other hand, the image of the feminine is conveyed as typified by care and acceptance of the other, characteristics that make it even more difficult to detach and distance oneself from the violent relationship without entailing a host of feelings of guilt and separative labours.

On the other hand, whether families, schools or social, cultural or religious groups, all human communities suggest or sometimes impose the most effective ways of embodying femininity or masculinity in order to remain part of the reference group, and to obtain advantages often of an identity rather than material nature. This is often pursued in more or less explicit ways whereby children are told what is expected (but also what is not allowed) from a gender perspective.

In his article, Alberto Pellai emphasises the significant and positive aspects of prevention interventions which try to subvert how we are asked to place subjectivity within stereotypes, and I believe that central to these processes lies the attempt to make children and young people realise that the differences between men and women in a given society have been constructed through a procedure in which we all participate, and that the hier-

archy of values expressed in every human sphere can be questioned and modified. After all, is this not the most valuable mandate of educational processes? The introduction of changes in the attitudes, behaviour and sensibilities of individuals and groups, and cascading into society?

The necessary operation at this point seems to be the breakdown of gender, a perspective that comes close to the one Giulia Selmi (2010) expounds in her book, *'Educare al genere. Riflessioni e strumenti per articolare la complessità'* ('Educating to gender. Reflections and tools to articulate complexity'), where she writes, 'If we do gender in every moment of our lives, we also have the possibility of undoing it. Undoing does not mean, clearly, eliminating gender differences in the direction of a scenario of neutrality, but challenging the dominant gender order and engaging in multiple re-writings of gender outside the binary conception of masculinity and femininity'. Gender differences are 'socially constructed, symbolically mediated and ritually sustained' and the feminine and masculine 'are mutually constructed, intertwining in an order, in a system of relationships, conflicts and adaptations'.

From the idea of the modes of intervention in the educational sphere proposed in the article, it seems clear to me that one cannot imagine suggesting to boys and girls how to become a certain type of man and woman, nor merely providing theoretical references without activating processes of appropriation, subjective change and reformulation of the gender image.

It should be said that while I find the work within school contexts indispensable, I believe that such an ambitious and far-reaching goal cannot be pursued in this area alone, which is why I found the reflections on parenting important and interesting from a perspective of prevention. I refer to the author's autobiographical elements and add my own: as a mother of two little girls, I twice attended birth preparation courses, in both of which the father's presence was treated as an accessory rather than a fundamental aspect, and which only marginally touched on the image that my husband and I were building as parents, before our encounter with the new life which was about to happen. The parental role also falls into the polarising system of gender stereotypes, and it is still common to hear people talk of fathers 'helping' mothers who will bear the brunt of the burden of raising their children.

I believe that the discovery of the sex of the unborn child, together with the expectations and fantasies of both parents, are a valuable working ground for accompanying couples to parenthood by becoming aware of the categories that guide them in the creation of their imaginary child, whose gestation takes place in the mind even before in the womb.

Of course, it is a task that is not accomplished while waiting for the child, but one that continues and is renewed at the various stages in which subjectivity is expressed, and the task of the adult world is to give children the opportunity to choose how to interpret social demands and how to negotiate them on the basis of their own specificities, aptitudes and abilities.

It is clear from Alberto Pellai's article how essential it is to approach the problem in a way that takes into account the different levels at which gender stereotypes are expressed, and the different contexts in which they underlie identity issues. Specifically with regard to adolescents, the attempt to change stereotypical references which influence life choices can lead to the liberation of subjectivities by helping adolescents to overcome preconceptions and mental closures which, among other limitations, draw nearer the danger of assuming rigid roles as victims or executioners in their relationships.

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