



Serena Vittorini

**“Until he first raised his hands  
against me”**

Stories of women and gender-based violence



Different stories, identical destinies, marked by a past involving men fossilized in violence and oppression and the present, where women provide support to other women in a safe place where they are free to talk about that past and, partly, emancipate themselves from it.

Male violence against women, often viewed as a private affair, actually represents a structural and social phenomenon that ranges from physical, sexual, economic and psychological violence all the way to stalking, rape and femicide – the killing of a “rebellious” woman, who is perceived by that man as his possession.

The statistics for Italy shows that this violence has a worryingly high frequency and in particularly dark years numbers have even reached one femicide every two days. The act of taking the life of a woman is almost always

the culmination of an ordeal of violence and oppression and is a phenomenon that does not seem to discriminate according to differences between north and south, cities and small towns, social classes and ethnic groups.

These same stories were repeated again and again during the pandemic and the number of women who turned to domestic violence support centres grew exponentially: in 2020 calls increased by 79.5% compared with the previous year.

All of this leads us towards one central fact: violence against women knows no respite. In fact, when it comes to any form of violence, it is necessary to reinforce the political and cultural choices that provide more systemic training and prevention, with a substantial increase in the number of adequately trained staff that respect women’s choices.

*Vittoria Tola  
Secretary General of UDI (Unione Donne in Italia)*





“After ten years I felt like I’d become a trained dog, even though I’m a strong, cultured woman. But you can’t explain it until you experience that slow journey, because it’s like falling into a trap.”

“I experienced coming close to death: 50 days locked away. He smashed up my face, all my bones broken, a titanium plate in my eye socket, a broken jaw.

He sprayed cleaning fluid in my face because for him I was just a rag, I had to pee myself.

He terrorised me by saying that he would put a petrol-soaked rag in my mouth and set it on fire. What could I say? Will he do it? Won’t he? After all, he put out cigarette butts on my tongue: ‘chew it and swallow’.

He was lucid about hitting me, he hit me in the right places and wore gym gloves so he would break my bones without leaving a mark.”

L’Aquila





“This place aims to eliminate the distance between us and other women. We are all in some way subject to male violence.”

“As well as the criminal cowardice of men, male violence feeds off the solitude and the failure of others to believe that a woman is being subjected to violence. Violent men are normally part of a social context. They are those who subtly begin that denigration, that constant demolition. That constant drip, drip, drip – when you feel it every day, it stops being distinguishable.”

*Simona, lawyer active in the fight against male violence, Co-founder of the Centro Antiviolenza per le Donne in L'Aquila. President of the Donatelli Tellini Association, where she runs the Centro Antiviolenza. Human rights activist.*



“Back when I was in my country he was already like that, but when I arrived in Italy it became hell. He didn't let me out of the house. Every day he became more violent but I was too afraid to report him, especially because of my son.

April 30 was a terrible day for me because this man, my husband, wanted to kill me. If it hadn't been for my son putting himself between us I would be dead. He ran off with my son and left me at home in a bloodbath.”

Caserta



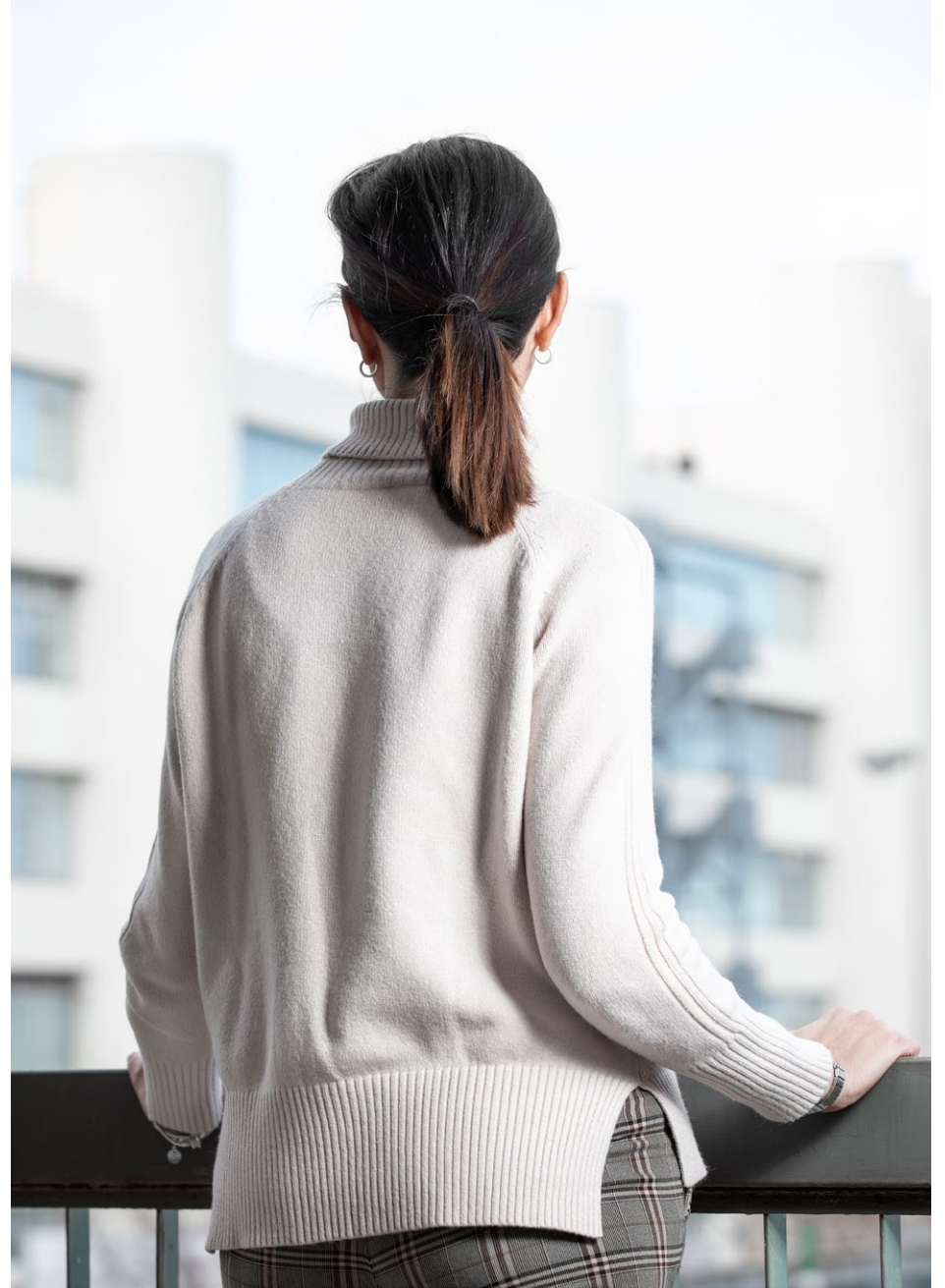


“I started because I have two kids and I needed money. I started in nightclubs and then he took me into the absolute depths of shit. He swore at me all the time until he raised his hands against me for the first time.

I reported him but he persuaded me to withdraw my complaint. For two days he was sweet and considerate. Then came the massacre. During a car trip he started hitting me, punching me and kicking me. I had to jump out of the car at 160 km an hour. He shut me in an apartment and did what he wanted with me, he butchered me. It's as if I'm still in that room, I'm no longer myself.”

Bari









“He didn’t trust me and that’s why he preferred to keep hold of the money. He made me leave my job as an architect because he wanted me to look after the home and the children. When I told him that I wanted to separate he tried to cancel me. He turned the children against me saying that it was my fault that we weren’t together anymore.”

“For three months he paid private investigators to follow me. I tried to put some distance between us but they mocked me: the judge mocked me, treating me like some hysterical wife.”

Bari



“I’m the father of Federica.

Federica was a teenager of 16 and a half. She had a love story. Slowly we became aware that she was subjugated by this boy. He was jealous and possessive.

They went to a party together. I believe that night Federica had made up her mind to leave him. I think he thought: ‘if you can’t be mine, you can’t be anybody’s’. He has never regretted it, never confessed, in spite of all the proof.”

Luigi, Lazio



"I believe that 99% of the women who use the centre need psychological support because violence breaks both the body and the psyche.

I have had 25 years of psychotherapy. I don't believe I will stop because there are always things that echo, you can't eliminate them, you need to recognise them each time and transform them until you find a form of compassion for your self. Because generally the main emotion that is triggered is guilt, the feeling that it is your fault."

*Filomena, psychptherapist and staff member at the Centro Antiviolenza in L'Aquila.*







“I was a born unwanted, wanted only by my mother. At eight and a half my will to live was taken away: every girl at that age has dreams, but I can't remember what they were.

At 12 years old I had a baby girl, I don't know if she's my daughter or my sister – she is the daughter of my father.

I never wanted this baby. I've never accepted her. I know that it isn't her fault but it isn't my fault either. I'm not ready to be a mother to her.”

Caserta





“When my husband came to meet me for the first time it was just for half an hour. One week later we were married.

When I got the documents to come to Italy from Morocco he didn't help me learn the language. He told me to be silent, that I had come to cook and clean.

He hit me, even when I was pregnant. I lived like that for three years, three years of pain and fear. He threw lit cigarettes in my face, he threatened me with a knife. He totally isolated me so I didn't know anything about the place I was living in.

Even my kids suffered, they didn't interact at school: they paid a price too. I lived in a home without water, electricity or food.

They said it was my fault, that I hadn't said anything.”

L'Aquila

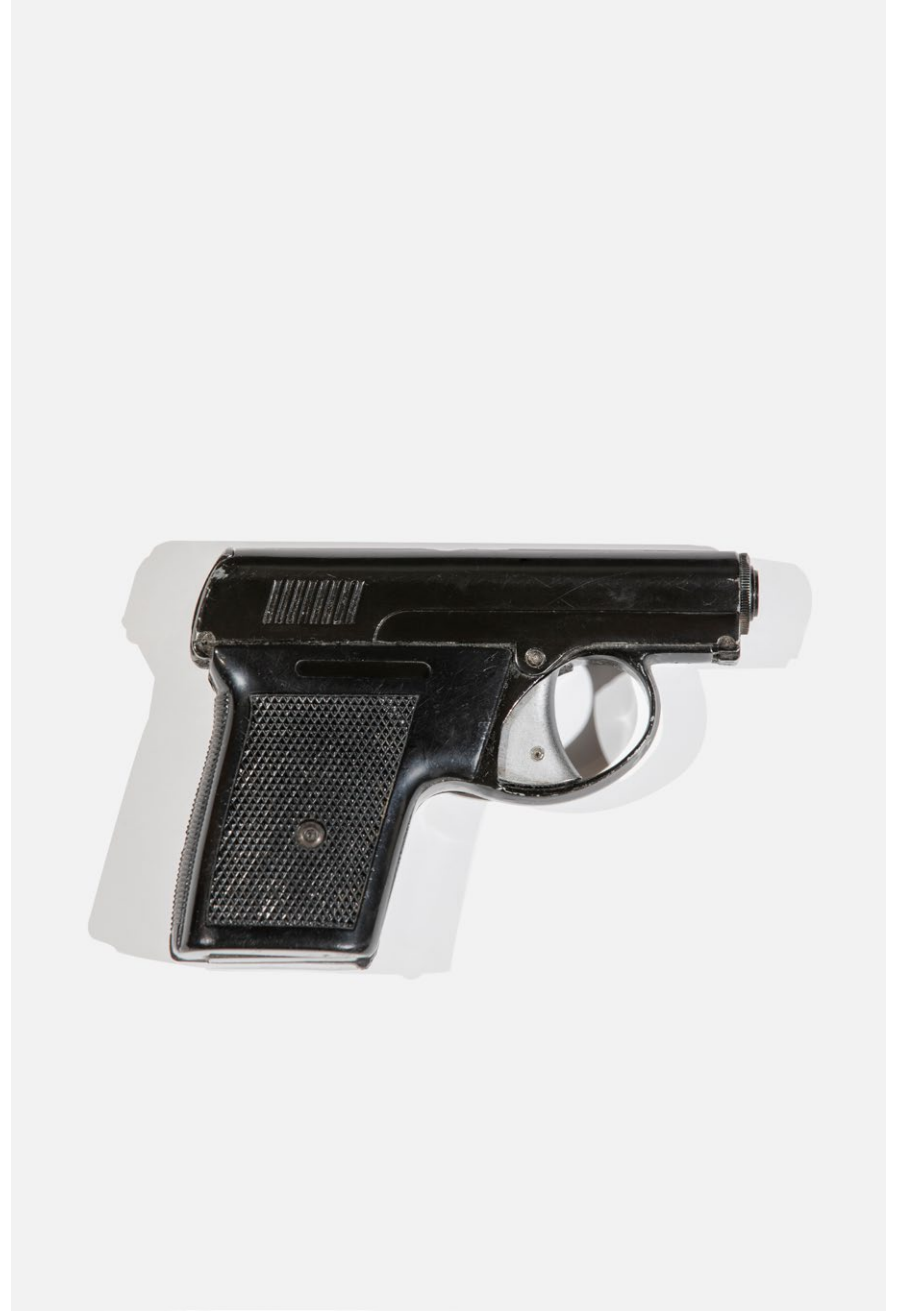




“He said, ‘you’re not leaving here’.  
I tried to calm him.  
I tried to run away but he managed to drag me  
back inside.  
He threw me to the ground inside the doorway  
and I lost my sight.  
I was conscious but everything was all white.  
He kicked and punched me while saying “You  
have to die. I have to kill you”.  
I managed to crawl out onto the balcony  
and, luckily, a woman saw me and called the  
carabinieri. He said that I had accidentally fallen  
in the lift.  
He had opened the door to show that he hadn’t  
trapped me inside for two days. He was lucid.  
He was judged to be unsound of mind, bipolar.  
He was acquitted.”

Bari







“In these situations you tend to justify him, and always put your own feelings to one side. That’s what I did for 25 years of marriage. Cursing, slaps, insults: he disparaged me and disparaged our children.

He attacked me and my daughter. When I saw my daughter’s face all bloody that gave me the strength to react and call the carabinieri. He was taking medication to stay calm, he made plans to kill everyone. He belonged to the armed forces, I learnt how to dismantle his pistol because I was terrified.”

Bari





“I was married for 18 years to this man that I had known since I was a little girl. When my daughter was born he showed his true face, that of a violent man.

He wouldn't let me go out to work. He would kick me out of the house in the middle of the night in my pyjamas and I would have to sleep in the car. He would break my phone so I couldn't call anyone.

Once I managed to call the carabinieri but they said that these things happened in families and told me to return home.

I had asked to separate but he had said no, that I had to stay and die in that house with him. One day for no reason he attacked us, me and my son. The look in his eyes was different.”

Caserta

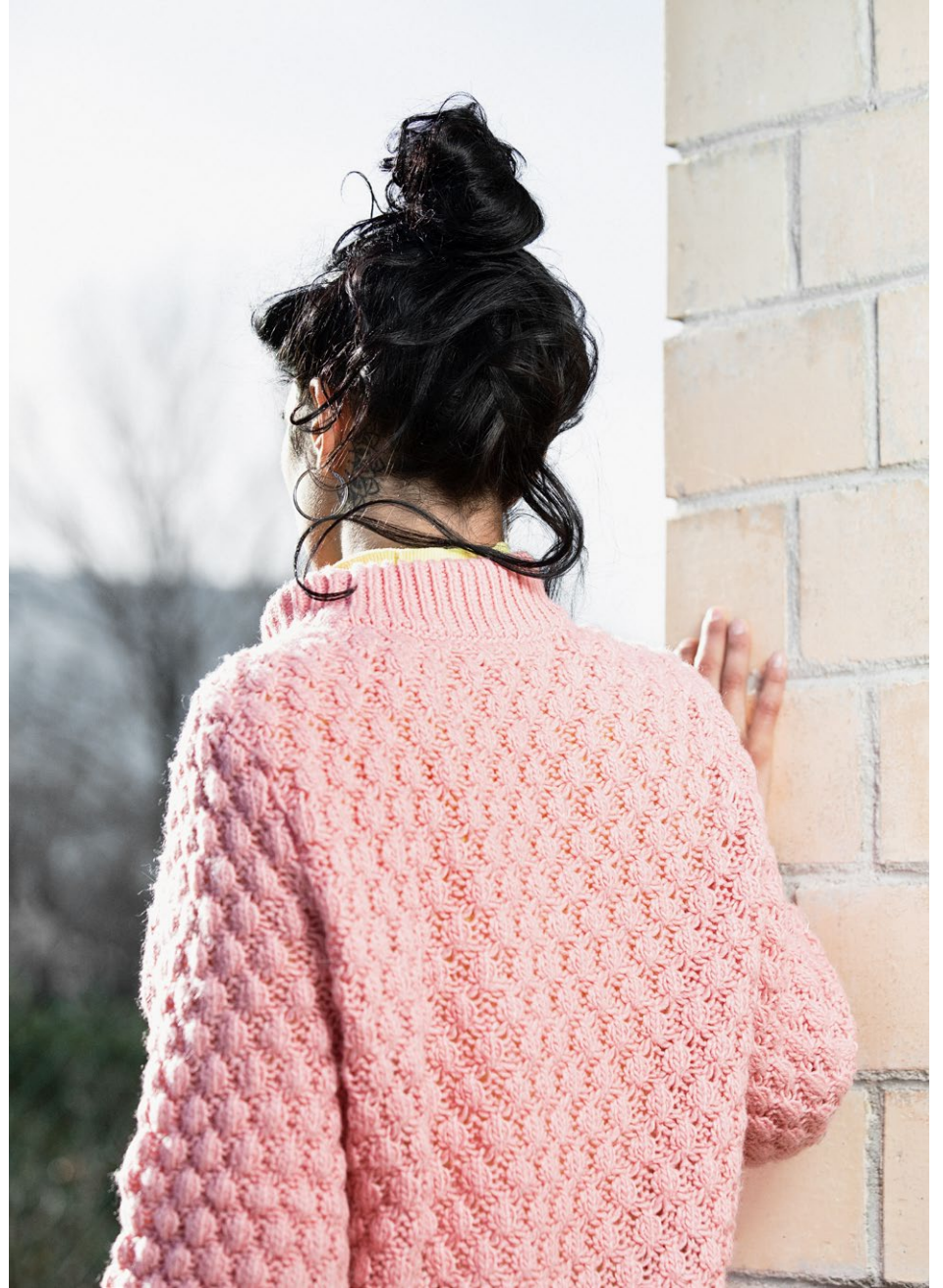




“There are also forms of violence that are less recognised as such but equally serious. I’m talking about economic violence and sexual violence. Some women find themselves in the position of saying, ‘I didn’t want to have sex with my husband but at least that way he would be calm. I considered that time of the week like a job, a duty that was part of an unwritten pact.’”

*Giorgia, member of staff at the Centro Anti-violenza per le Donne in L’Aquila.*







“His behaviour could be very strange, I saw that he didn’t experience sex in a natural way. He asked me to do things I wasn’t comfortable with. On his phone I discovered intimate photos of me that he was sharing with people he knew and with strangers, who made vulgar comments about my body. He was also sharing some photos on various chat groups.”

“We need to find out why we form relationships with these kinds of people. It’s always necessary to listen to the part of us that says ‘Maybe you’re not actually happy, are you really sure about this person?’”

L’Aquila

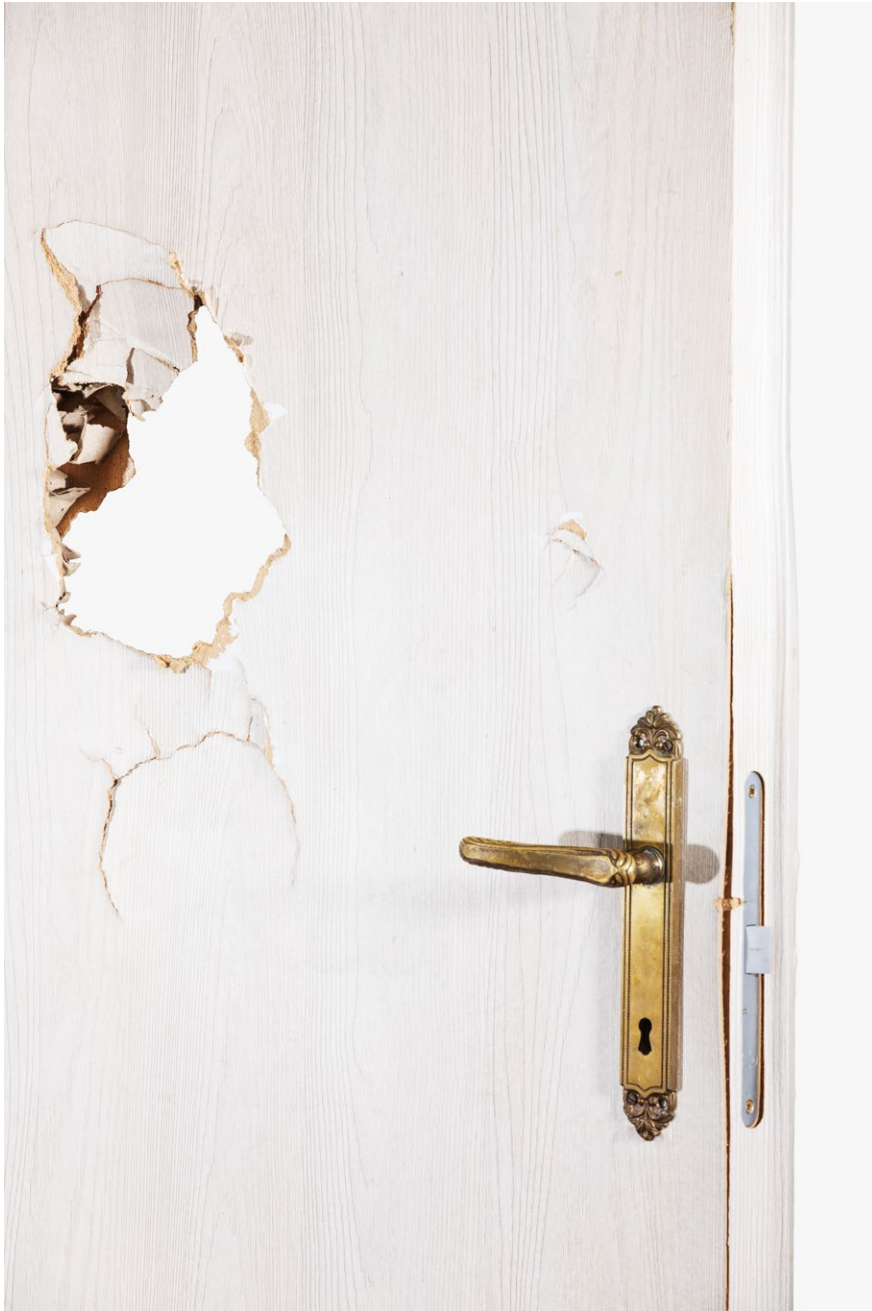




"I grew up in a context where the predominant mentality normalized violence. My father used violence but justified it as a gesture of care towards his children. I was subjected to physical, psychological and economic violence, but I didn't understand.

The situation worsened until a friend helped me become aware of it: 'you can't stay in that house because I know someone who was in that situation and she's not here anymore to talk about it.' I ran away from home and moved to a different country.

Bari





“I used to tell myself ‘It was just a flash of momentary anger, an isolated instance’. Then it became more frequent. What hurts the most are the lies, denying the evidence with such certainty, the feeling that you’re going crazy, that is the hardest pain to heal.”

“Shutting myself in the bedroom to escape his wrath and then finding the front door completely smashed. Seeing that broken door again every day was horrible.”





“The most engrossing experience for me was that of a young Nigerian girl aged under 18. She had arrived completely broken: it was impossible to get anything out of her.

Then she began to tell the story of her journey from Nigeria. Once she arrived in Libya she had been put in a brothel where she was kept for three months and where she was completely dehumanized. Then they put her on a boat and when she arrived in Italy a couple of Nigerians put her to work on the streets as a prostitute.

She chose to come to the centre. Slowly this girl's posture began to change, sometimes she'd even arrive smiling.”

*Anna, has worked at the Centro Antiviolenza in L'Aquila since its foundation.*





A young female victim of trafficking, Caserta.





“This person came into my life in a subtle way. He made me eliminate everything connected to my past. For him, all my male acquaintances had some sort of sexual significance and when talking about them he would be vulgar and disparaging. And he made things up about my life that weren’t true. Eventually this evolved into physical violence.

It changed my life. Even though I know he is in prison, I always watch over my shoulder. I can’t stand it when someone walks behind me.”

Bari



“With the work of the associations we managed to make it understood that male violence against women can not be considered something of a private nature, but public and therefore the State had to take action in relation to this scandalous phenomenon that has a catalyst that generates and multiplies it – the disparity between men and women.

As long as this exists, just like the use of gender stereotypes when raising our boys and girls, women will never be completely free.”

*Maria Pia, lawyer at the court of Bari and president of Giraffa onlus association, a women’s association for female victims of violence.*

Bari







“Joint custody was a problem because he would reprimand me constantly, to the detriment of the children. One of my daughters called him to ask why he didn’t come to get them anymore:

- Your mum wouldn’t have let you come and you don’t want to come and sleep at mine.

- If you want, of course I’ll come.

- Listen, if you don’t like me as a father I don’t know what to say.

- Come and get me any time. What’s important is that we’re together. At school I don’t even go outside to play because I’m thinking of you.

- Oh stop it! You don’t love me either.

The girl is only 11.”

Lazio







“I took pictures of the children who had been abused, of the head wound, of the child’s back against which he had broken a broom. Those are just a few memories of the violence he inflicted on us.

Those times he was drunk, I think he could even have killed and not remembered the day after.”

L’Aquila



“When you are a little girl they already start collecting stuff for a ‘bottom drawer’. It happened to me too. I remember that my mum bought bed linen, pans.

It’s really a cultural difference about how they teach us to belong to society. I’m the first person to go to university and after me my brother and sister went too. In my family I brought a change. Sometimes when you change one aspect of the system the system then changes too.”

*Maria Preziosa, member of staff at the E.V.A. cooperative, Caserta.*



