

Sonja Plesset.

Sheltering Women: Negotiating Gender and Violence in Northern Italy.

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Sonja Plesset's book is a detailed ethnographic study of two women's shelters in Parma, a small city in Northern Italy. Parma is a wealthy modern city that is considered socially progressive and where people in general would not perceive intimate partner violence as a significant social issue. As Plesset explained, people tend to think that it is a more important social issue in southern Italy. This perception also influences the perceptions about family and gender. The assumption of a wealthy city makes Plesset's work even more interesting as she demonstrates that intimate partner violence occurs in Parma. The existing services for women experiencing violence are good indications of the presence of intimate partner violence in the region.

As an anthropologist, Plesset is used to a data collection approach based on observing the details of daily life. When studying intimate partner violence she asks: "Where does an anthropologist situate herself?" (14). In my view Plesset's question is superfluous. She is forgetting that intimate partner violence is part of a continuum in women's lives. Therefore to understand and interpret gender and power relations it is not necessary to be at the heart of a violent scene. Violence shapes women's lives and impacts decisions they may take for their future. Their perceptions of themselves can reflect what it means to survive intimate partner violence. This was a concern about Plesset's work when I started reading the book, but she quickly changed my perception.

Plesset's exploration of intimate partner violence goes beyond the introspection of women's experience of violence to take the prism of organizations in place in Parma. Plesset looks at two women's shelters, one that qualifies as leftist (Women United) and the other that is Catholic (Family Aid). The author situates her study of violence "as one aspect of a larger system of hierarchy and power that exists in a particular form in Italy" (4). At the outset of the book, the reader may think Plesset will use a series of abused women stories to better understand the interaction between gender and violence in Northern Italy. However, she in fact explores perceptions of workers and volunteers from both organizations to situate the work, political stand and ideological views promoted by the two organizations.

The influence of communism and Catholicism shape discourse about gender relations. The women's movement discourse also influences the specific mission and philosophy of the shelters studied by Plesset. To capture community responses to intimate partner violence, Plesset became a volunteer for fourteen months in both organizations. She soon realized that there were significant differences between them, especially in regards to what it is to be a woman in Italian society. Under the Women United organization women are clearly involved in women's rights, the recognition of women's specificities and in eliminating violence against women. This emphasis is found in several interviews with caseworkers from the organization. Women's experience is recognized as valuable information by caseworkers, which creates solidarity among women and establishes trust for women in need. Women United's primary goal is to help abused women whether they stay in or leave their relationship. In Family Aid, Plesset discovers a different approach to helping women who experience intimate partner violence. Focussing on pregnant women and women with small children this Catholic organization's "primary goal was to welcome every life, provide women with the freedom not to abort, and promote the value of life beginning with conception" (96). Under Family Aid, traditional family values are essential and good motherhood skills are fundamental. Over the years

Family Aid has changed its focus to serve women “with troubled stories” (101). The “Politics of Gender and Shelter” chapter is fascinating, especially for understanding different discourses and ideologies about gender relations, intimate partner violence and more broadly about women and men in Italian society.

Why compare the work of organizations that are so different? Looking at those organizations is almost a pretext for Plesset to explore larger social processes at play in Italian society. In engaging in her fieldwork Plesset situates herself as questioning modernity, gender and tradition beyond intimate partner violence. You get different understandings of IPV when looking at multiple modernities and diverse traditions. This also emerges through the women’s stories that Plesset presents in the “Two Sides of Shame” chapter.

Plesset locates intimate partner violence as an issue that can occur or not in couples’ lives. Interviewing women and men on their perceptions of gender roles you get a sense of what individuals think about a variety of aspects of interrelations among couples. As a reader it is interesting to see how resistance to change and gender role transformation that couples experience on a daily basis can be negotiated in different ways by key informants. For people who want to have a broader understanding of intimate partner violence and how it is interwoven in Italian society, this is an interesting book that almost reads like a novel. For experts in the domain of intimate partner violence it seems a little redundant or déjà vu. However, it is important to mention that, as an anthropologist, the author is leading the way in conducting research in this particular domain.

Carmen Gill

University of New Brunswick
cgill@unb.ca

Carmen Gill is the Director of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research at the University of New Brunswick and the Director of the Canadian observatory on the justice system response to intimate partner violence. She has been involved in practice and research on the community and justice response to domestic violence for several years in Canada.

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