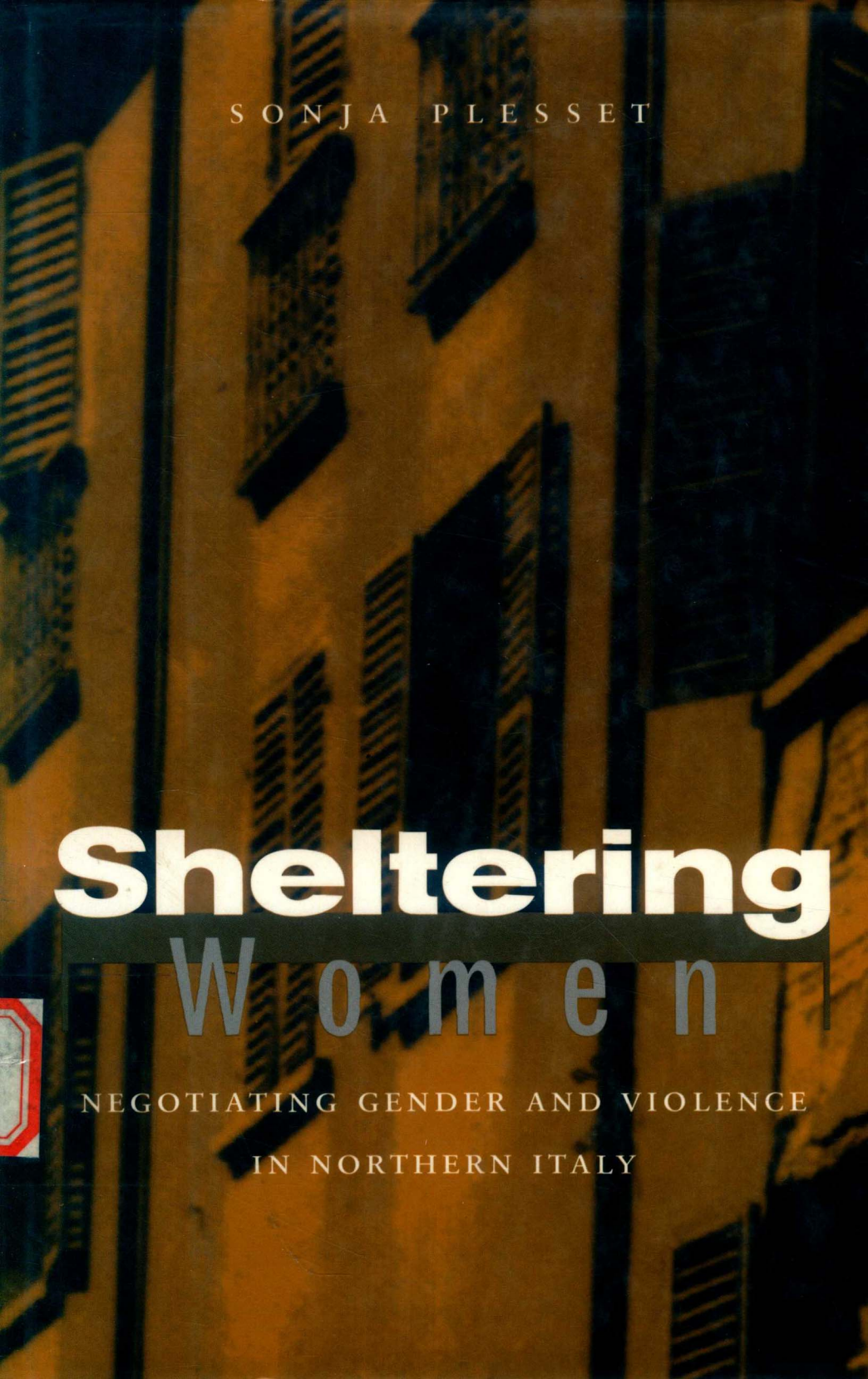
SONJA PLESSET
Sheltering Women
NEGOTIATING GENDER AND VIOLENCE
IN NORTHERN ITALY

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Negotiating Gender and Violence in Northern Italy

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Contents

Introduction

THE IDEA FOR THIS PROJECT began in 1997, when I visited the city of Bologna and noticed a large billboard in the main piazza. On the sign I saw a cartoonlike stick figure with curly hair and a long outstretched arm intended to signify resistance. Beside the figure were the words *Zero tolerance contro la violenza sulle donne* (Zero tolerance against violence against women).[1] I was immediately intrigued by this very public display of protest. Though I had come to Bologna to study an entirely different topic,[2] I decided to call the number listed on the billboard in order to find out more about the "Zero Tolerance" campaign. I had a long-standing interest in gender and women's lives, and decided to investigate what the campaign was all about. My curiosity led me to Bologna's Casa delle Donne (Women's House) and to the regional and national network of women's organizations that exist throughout Italy. I soon discovered that Bologna was one of many cities in Emilia-Romagna with an active domestic violence program. After several weeks of travel throughout the region, I eventually settled in Parma, a historically leftist city[3] with just the right population size, history, and layout for an ethnographic study of community reactions to intimate-partner violence.

Parma is small, but not too small, with just enough people (approximately 170,000) to qualify as an urban setting and yet retain the intimate feeling of a town where people know one another and serendipitous meetings can occur on a regular basis. With its historic *piazza del duomo*, open-air market, and numerous parks and gathering spots within walking distance of each other, the city makes it easy to meet up with people and move among various locations on a daily basis.

Parma is known throughout Italy and the world for its wealth and sophistication.[4] Residents of Parma pride themselves on their high quality of life, their passion for opera, and their gastronomical delicacies.[5] As I continued to spend time in Parma, I realized that my project would entail studying intimate-partner violence in precisely the place where it supposedly does not occur—a wealthy city that prides itself on being modern, socially progressive, and quintessentially European. Although most people I spoke with recognized violence against women to be an important social issue, many told me it was a problem that primarily existed in the southern regions of Italy. Quite a few, in fact, suggested I change my field site to a town in Calabria or Sicily in order to get a sense of "real" gender inequality and oppression. Such essentialist rhetoric is widespread throughout the Italian peninsula and has been used by academics and politicians alike to account for socioeconomic, political, and social differences between northern and southern Italy (Schneider 1998).

After two months of preliminary research conducted in November and December of 1998, I returned to Parma in August of 1999 and began what I thought would be a year of fieldwork focused on community responses to heterosexual intimate-partner violence.[6] Soon after arriving, I became a volunteer with Parma's two main service providers for battered women: the leftist or communist organization known as Women United and the Catholic organization known as Family Aid. In addition to supplying food, housing, and counseling, these two organizations gave women an opportunity to explore their own histories and chart new trajectories for the future. Although clients were ostensibly free to make their own decisions about their lives, the particular choices they made were routinely criticized, often in sharply opposing ways, by caseworkers, board members, and volunteers. I soon discovered that the ideological vision of what it means—or *should* mean—to be a woman in Italian society, as elsewhere, was highly contested ground. For the women working within Women United, the feminist movement had opened the door for women to exist independently of men. Motherhood and marriage were seen as choices and not necessities. For the women working within Family Aid, motherhood was a woman's most important duty. Although self-sufficiency was important, especially in cases of partner violence, ultimate success lay in finding a new male mate and perpetuating the nuclear family.

My project began to take shape around what mattered most to the people I was working with. I began to draw links between the contrast-

ing visions of gender, family, and hierarchy that I was observing within Women United and Family Aid, and the ambivalence about gender relations that I was noting in the larger society. What was originally a project focused on intimate-partner violence expanded to encompass questions about gender relations, Italian feminism, and the laws that govern marriage and family. Rather than soften the focus on violence, this expansion served to provide a more nuanced setting and allowed me to contextualize violence as one part of a continuum of hierarchy and subordination.

Violence means different things in different parts of the world (Riches 1986; Gilsenan 2002), but violence also means different things when examined from different vantage points within a particular cultural context. According to David Riches, "Anglo-Saxon understandings indicate that 'physical hurt done to others' counts as violence only in certain social contexts," meaning that when the physical hurt is considered illegitimate, only then is it understood as violence (1986:3). In many cases, the state may determine a boundary between what is considered merely force or physical hurt (legitimate) and what is considered violence (illegitimate) that is at odds with individual experience. In Italy, the legal system recognizes violence within the home only when the physical hurt is repetitive and intentional. At the same time there are women's centers that determine a broad range of unacceptable and hence illegitimate acts. In her work on domestic violence in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hawaii, Sally Engle Merry suggests that "a continuing tension is created by the disjunction between legal processes that attempt to define the legal meaning of wife battering solely in physical terms and the experiential meaning of violence that is rooted in conceptions of masculinity, femininity, and the family" (1994:970).

Just as there may be a divergence between law and individual experience, there may also be divergences among individuals living within a particular cultural context. There are some women who accept the blows they receive as part of the "sacrifice" they must make in order to keep their family intact. There are others who live with violence for long periods of time before recognizing their experiences as unacceptable and deciding to request a separation. And there are still others who immediately interpret physical hurt inflicted by a husband or partner as illegitimate violence. There is, of course, an even fuller range of understandings among men and women who have been performers, observers, and non-observers of physical acts of harm. As Michael Gilsenan suggests, the study of violence can "tell us much about the ways in

which groups and persons organize and imagine themselves, constitute relations of power and hierarchy, and create social identities and meanings" (2002:99).

Violence itself, however, can be difficult to study and even more difficult to write about (Daniel 1996; Gilsenan 2002). This book is not an "ethnography of violence"; nor is it an "anthropography of violence" along the lines of what Daniel (1996) produced from his work on collective violence in Sri Lanka. Instead, it attempts to study violence as one aspect of a larger system of hierarchy and power that exists in a particular form in Italy, but also exists in many different forms in many different parts of the world. Violence against women that occurs within the home and is performed by intimates is an act that takes place in villages, towns, and cities around the globe. By situating my study in Italy, I do not wish to suggest it is any more or less pervasive in Italy than it is in the United States, Europe, South America, Asia, or anywhere else. Statistics on intimate-partner violence are notoriously difficult to compile, and attempts to pinpoint locations where such violence might be more severe risk falling into the trap of what Daniel suggests an ethnography of violence might produce. As he suggests about his own research,

> To see the ultimate significant effects of this work as ethnographic would exculpate other peoples in other places whose participation in collective violence is of the same sort; even more dangerously, it could tranquilize those of us who live self-congratulatory lives in times and countries apparently free of the kind of violence that has seized Sri Lanka recently, could lull us into believing that we or our country or our people were above such brutalities. (Daniel 1996:7)

When I tell people in the United States that my work focuses on intimate-partner violence in Italy, many are anxious to know what I "discovered" through my research. "Is it a big problem in Italy?" some inquire. Others suggest, "It's much worse over there, isn't it?" Some are even hopeful I may have discovered a solution, and ask, "Did you find out why it happens?" I find such questions uncomfortable, but I do my best to explain that violence against intimates is a problem in many places, no more and no less significant in Italy than in our own backyards. Although violence itself, whether collective or personal, is "in many ways incoherent, nondescribable, defiant of sense-making" (Merry 1994:970–971), I hope that by situating violence within one particular cultural context, and underscoring the importance of recognizing intimate-partner violence as a nearly ubiquitous phenomenon whose meaning is shaped in local cultural realities, we can learn how

individuals negotiate, question, resist, and cope with behaviors that often defy explanation. At the same time, I am hopeful that we can understand some of the larger social processes that intersect with the shaping of individual subjectivities and move toward creating locally relevant systems and avenues of support.

In his discussion of how anthropologists can approach the study of violence, Michael Gilsenan aptly notes that "our own anthropological listening leads us to examine in great detail people's own narratives of violence within and among communities and persons," and while "we try to elicit the images and memories of those who do not necessarily have a public voice," at the same time "such inquiries run the risk of voyeurism and a kind of pornography, of probing acute personal and collective traumas only to write in a way that appeals to a reader's uneasy sense of exploitation" (2002:109–110). Gilsenan is right to remind us of this risk, but we must also respect the agency of the individuals we work with and allow their own theoretical musings to structure our retelling of their lives. Rather than fit the narratives I was privy to into some preexisting theoretical framework, I found that each narrative contained its own theories—about violence, about gender, and about making sense of daily life.

In this book, I provide the political, cultural, historical, and legal contexts for understanding two indigenous explanations for intimate-partner violence: first, that violence against women reflects the cultural and historical gender inequalities embedded in Italian society, including what some termed "old-fashioned" or "traditional" understandings of masculinity; and second, that violence against women reflects confusion and ambivalence about "new" or "modern" forms of gender relations. The first explanation places the blame on tradition; the second cites the transition to modernity as the culprit. Both emphasize societal understandings of gender and emphasize collective, rather than individual, responsibility.

It is now widely accepted that modernity encompasses gendered processes, and that conceptions of gender are often used by state and local actors to symbolize and make sense of modernity. Lisa Rofel, among others, has demonstrated that "gender differentiation—the knowledges, relations, meanings, and identities of masculinity and femininity—operates at the heart of modernity's power" (1999:19). But just as understandings of gender can be used to lay claim to particular visions of modernity, so can understandings of modernity be used to lay claim to particular visions of gender. In this book, I am primarily interested

in the latter approach, specifically how local agents use the categories of tradition and modernity as rhetorical strategies to negotiate gender relations and gender change. Rather than presuppose any characteristic that is common to "modernity" or "tradition," I take these categories as ways of thinking about time, change, identity, and subjectivity.

As categories that are filled with meaning by both state and local actors, tradition and modernity are often used in strategic ways to help make sense of daily social life. Although this book is about the *uses* of tradition and modernity, and engages many of the oppositions within Parma and Italian society at large, through my fieldwork I realized that it was the overlap of these oppositions that would provide the most insight into the realities of everyday life. I could have written about modernity and tradition, or communism and Catholicism, or Women United and Family Aid (indeed such oppositions appear again and again in the pages that follow), but such a book would not have accurately represented my experience in the field. Although these oppositions clearly existed, and were referenced repeatedly by friends and colleagues, I also observed many moments of overlap in which the oppositions became flexible tools for individuals on the ground. This volume focuses on the moments of overlap, the gray areas where oppositions that were once distinct no longer appeared as orderly, and the boundaries between seemingly rigid categories actually became quite permeable. Ultimately, this book is about gender change in Parma and the challenges, frustrations, and successes people experienced as they negotiated such change in their daily lives.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 first sets the stage with an introduction to the daily rhythms of Parma, an overview of my fieldwork methodology (what I've termed "fieldwork through networks"), and a discussion of the theoretical frameworks within which I situate my research.

The book continues, in Chapter 2, with a history of the "postfeminist" period of Italian society. Through the narratives of former feminist activists living in Parma, I explain my use of this term, trace a broad sketch of Italian feminism, and outline the key political opposition (communist vs. Catholic) that divided Italian society for close to half a century. In Chapter 3, I move to a discussion of the ideologies of gender and family that informed daily practice within Women United and Family Aid. A detailed look at the methodologies of these organizations and

at the services they provide offers vivid examples of the negotiation of gender proficiency that was underway in the 1990s. Women United was founded by women with political roots in the Italian Communist Party who endeavored to recognize gender difference and build solidarity among women. Family Aid, on the other hand, was founded by women with strong connections to Catholicism who anchored their mission in the preservation of life and the production of "good" mothers.

In chapters 4 and 5, I turn to the layers of shame many women experience when faced with a violent husband or partner. Shaped by the confluence of, on the one hand, local Catholic norms that allow a husband to hit his wife for purposes of "education," and, on the other, feminist ideals that proclaim women's independence from men, the shame many feel is complex, difficult to displace, and only compounded by the inconsistencies of the Italian legal system.

In the final chapter, I consider the sites of resistance I discovered through my participation in daily life at Women United and Family Aid. As microcosms of society at large, the two organizations revealed the rigidity and malleability of gender relations in Italian society.

Although the chapters in this book are largely ethnographic, the theoretical subtext reveals how ordinary Italians used the categories of tradition and modernity as organizing tropes to talk about gender, hierarchy, and violence during a time of significant social and political change. As the people of Parma dealt with declining birthrates, the fall of Italy's dominant postwar political parties, new economic realities, and the legal and social victories of the feminist movement, gender became a site for the articulation of difference on political, regional, and local levels. This book examines such articulations as they played out in women's organizations, marriages, heterosexual partnerships, families, and courtrooms.

Though I have not attempted to disguise the name of the city, all names and locations of individuals and institutions have been changed in order to protect the identities of the people who so generously opened their lives to me. On occasion, I have created composite identities or disguised certain biographical facts in order to further protect the identities of my friends and colleagues. All my research was conducted in standard Italian with occasional phrases of dialect (most people in Parma use standard Italian), and all translations of conversations, interviews, and Italian publications (unless otherwise indicated) are my own.

CHAPTER 1

Engaging the Field

A PARMA SI VA IN BICI (in Parma you bike) was a phrase I heard over and over during my fourteen months of fieldwork. When I arrived for the very first time in Parma, I was struck by the sight of so many people on bicycles. Cyclists took their place as part of traffic and were not afraid to ride directly beside buses and cars, in the streets of the historic city center as well as on major roads leading out of town. During other trips to Italy, I had grown accustomed to the constant whir of *motorini* (scooters) and *moto* (motorcycles), but Parma was the first city I visited where an ordinary one-speed bicycle seemed to be the dominant mode of transportation. I saw parents riding with children in child seats (at times with one child in front and another in back), men and women biking to work in suits and dresses, elderly ladies on bicycles bundled up in fur coats and hats, and nuns riding with their black dresses and habits flowing behind them in the wind. Although I first found the city's emphasis on its wealth and sophistication incongruous with the widespread practice of bicycle riding, as I learned more about daily life in Parma—the importance of keeping up appearances and reproducing centuries-old "traditions"—I came to understand bicycle riding as one of many aspects of local life that illustrate the ongoing construction of personhood and identity.

The daily *passeggiata* or stroll through the streets of the city center is another example of how residents of Parma fill the categories of modernity and tradition with locally informed symbols and meanings. Except for Sunday mornings, when the streets possess an eerie calm, Parma is

often full of people doing errands, walking to work, meeting friends and family, and going shopping. During the week the pulse of the city changes throughout the day. The streets are bustling throughout the early hours, especially just before 1:00 PM when people hurry to get home in time for the midday meal. Then there is a two-hour lull in the afternoon when shops and offices close for the *pausa pranzo* (lunch break) and many people are home eating and relaxing. By 3:00 or 3:30 the streets are busy again with people returning to work or continuing with the day's errands. In the early evening, the streets again fill with people, but this time people walk at a more leisurely pace as they engage in the daily *passeggiata* and stroll through the city with family and friends.[1]

Although for many residents an evening *passeggiata* is a part of the week's daily rhythm, Saturdays are special. Children are in school and many businesses are open on Saturday mornings, but by Saturday afternoon the weekend has officially begun. The sidewalks fill with couples, families, and groups of friends. As people stroll up and down Via Cavour and the uppermost section of Strada della Repubblica, they frequently stop to chat with a friend or acquaintance or to look inside a shop window.[2]

Some call the weekend *passeggiata* the fashion show of Parma, as people often dress in fashionable, name-brand clothing in order to *fare bella figura* as they stroll through the city streets.[3] *Fare bella figura*, which literally translates as "to make a beautiful figure," is an expression used commonly throughout Italy. According to Sydel Silverman, "The concern with one's *bella figura*, or 'good face,' is ever-present as a quite self-conscious guide to behavior. The concept is a measure of personal integrity, but it has little to do with one's essence, character, intention, or other inner condition; rather it centers upon public appearances. To acquire and preserve *bella figura* requires being impeccable before the eyes of others" (Silverman 1975:40).

Whereas in English one might use the expression "to look good" or "to make a good impression," there is no direct equivalent for *fare bella figura*, which connotes the performative aspect of putting on a good display for neighbors, colleagues, friends, and anyone who happens to notice. The expression also can be used with respect to cities, countries, and institutions. For instance, Italy may *fare bella figura* by performing in a certain way to a worldwide audience. In Parma, when people spoke to me about the way they acted in a particular situation they might say, *ho fatto bella figura* (I cut a fine figure). Use of *bella figura* can also refer to