



◀ AllYours, artist Michèle Pagel, 2019,
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(Mixed media, 120×230×100 cm)

**“You can only help a victim of violence
if she herself is willing to accept help.”**

*An employee of the Women’s Shelter in Wels
(Upper Austria), talks about her ordinary working
day, work with women and dealing with different
forms of violence.*

Nadja Riahi, journalist from Vienna, (Austria)

——— *The exact address of the women’s shelter is not
known. How can a woman find her way to you?
What steps are taken from the moment you get in
touch until she arrives at your door?*

Usually, the initial contact is made by telephone, or sometimes by email. We clarify the situation over the phone and, if possible, agree on an in-person consultation interview. The support offered can range from assistance in obtaining a domestic restraining order to moving into a shelter. If it turns out that a woman is in need of protection because she is in an acute situation and is exposed to violence, we give her our address.

We can also use the premises of the Wels counselling centre to have a conversation in order to clarify the circumstances. This might be, for example, if we’re unsure whether or not a relative or friend of a perpetrator of violence is trying to sneak their way into our trust.

Sometimes women make a planned move over here following counselling conversations at a shelter. When we do this, we show the abused women our shelter and accommodation, if it's not then occupied. We talk about the framework for living in a women's shelter, with the various rules and regulations here. Then the woman moves at the most suitable and planned moment for her, such as when the abuser is at work, and she has the chance to discreetly pack her things together.

Sometimes women come to us who didn't previously know about our shelter and were sent to us by the police because of an actual incident. Often times, police restraining orders aren't enough to protect women. It can also happen that the abuser runs off right before the police call on him, and so preventing the ban from staying in the housing being served, or stopping the police from taking his keys once he has been expelled from the shared housing.

When a woman arrives, we find out if she requires any medical attention. If necessary, we take photographs as evidence for the future pressing of charges and clarify whether the woman wants to lodge a statement immediately in cases where the police have not yet been involved. In our country, no woman is obliged to report anything to the police if she herself doesn't want to. We work with her to develop a safety plan to help protect herself and her children when she leaves home. This includes saving an emergency police number or using a pocket alarm to call for help as a last resort...

_____ *What are the reasons that women come to your shelter?*

One in five women has been abused during their relationships. The women's shelter offers them and their abused children a safe place to live. **Violence can take a whole host of different forms: physical, mental, sexual, or economic.** For example, women living in violent relationships are mainly subjected to physical, but also mental violence, and often with a sexualised aspect.

And it is precisely this combination of forms of violence that leads to the victim being completely in the power of the man. But this also includes such things as, for example, the destruction of items of particular value to a woman. Of course, there can be stalking, spying, intimidation over the telephone, blind jealousy and threats, including those directed at other family members and children. Being abused or witnessing abuse harms the well-being of a child and increases the risk of their being abused themselves in adulthood.

Mental abuse includes offensive language and public ridiculing. Women experience this type of violence as the destruction of their self-esteem and mental health. Abusers often isolate women and cut off their contacts with friends or any socialising at all. The same applies to financial violence: women are deprived of the ability to manage their own savings. And every woman who is physically abused can be considered to have experienced sexual abuse as well.

_____ *How is their accommodation organised? How long do women tend to stay in the shelter?*

The regulations of the federal state of Upper Austria, from which we receive 100% of our funding, provide for a maximum stay of twelve months. We try to work with the women who come here, focusing on a period of six months, because we know from experience how important it is for women to make a speedy return to independent life. So the average stay is six months. However, the length of their stay depends very much on the degree of threat they are under and on the particular life issues that need to be sorted out (organisation of childcare, looking for work and housing).

_____ *How many places are there in the Wels refuge?*

We offer accommodation for six women with their children, as well as a barrier-free emergency room. Each residential suite is provided with its own bathroom. There is one shared kitchen for two of these units, and the rest of the living quarters have one big communal kitchen. There are also public spaces such as a youth room or a large children's room.

_____ *How did you end up in this work? Why did you decide to take it up?*

I started out as a phone attendant, and I loved it. When a vacancy became available, I was offered more hours. **It's an exciting job supporting women as they move towards a violence-free future.** It's nice to see women regain their self-esteem.

_____ *What is your typical working day like? What is your area of responsibility and what tasks does it involve?*

First of all, we hold conversations over the phone or in person. These are often aimed at bringing some stability to their mental condition, since the women are very often in one of acute crisis. The first actual steps after a woman's move here involve providing her with a way of getting by in life: with the woman, we develop plans together for the near future and advise her about the opportunities that she has. It is very important for us that the woman herself makes decisions about her personal goals; we accompany her along this path, but we don't impose any of our own preferences. **When you work in a women's shelter, it's important to regard women as the best experts on their own situation.** No one knows the abuser as well as they do, and no one can assess him or the situation better.

The difficulty here is that violent relationships are not accompanied by violence all the time. There are also pleasant phases full of love, added to which are fears for the future and pressure from family and society. All of this makes it difficult for a woman to take the decision to exit this relationship, as she hopes the man will change. We also accept her decision to give her man another chance if she wants to try again. It is extremely important for us that the woman knows that, if necessary, she can turn to us again and move back in with us.

We support women in everything they need: for instance, we accompany them when they go to the authorities, on their visits to the police, to the job centre or to the courts (either as support during the process of negotiating a divorce or in criminal trials where the woman is the injured party).

_____ *What third-party professionals do you work with?
(translators, psychotherapists, police officers, doctors)*

We enjoy a good level of cooperation with the police. There's an emergency call button in the shelter with a direct connection to the police. Also, if necessary, translators are regularly involved, and this is particularly important when making decisions with crucial consequences. If there's a need for it, we can help find a psychotherapist.

_____ *How have you been dealing with the coronavirus crisis? Austrians weren't allowed to leave their homes during the quarantine period.*

Our women's shelter was fully occupied during the quarantine, and our work went on as usual. The only thing was that the staff was divided into two groups in order to guard against a situation in which the whole team would have to abandon work due to illness. In this way, we ensured the best possible care was provided for the women. But there were more consultation conversations than usual. Assessment of the situation and risk weighing usually take place by phone (first contact). During these telephone conversations, consultative meetings are scheduled or a move is organised.

_____ *There are only women working in the women's shelter. Often, the women who come to you have no idea what an ordinary man or a healthy relationship can be like. Wouldn't it be a good idea if there were men working in the shelters too?*

This is actually the reason that we did decide we would have a man in Wels, working as a child mentor, in order to transmit a positive male image to the children and women there.

_____ *Thanks to modern technology, it's very easy to get in touch with each other nowadays. In addition to the usual mobile phone, we have social networks and e-mail too. So men are able to contact their women at any time of the day, or send them a photo or video message. How do the staff of the women's shelter deal with this issue?*

We advise women to block the man if the situation is serious. To help the woman calm down and put her thoughts in order. Apart from that, right at the stage when they first move in with us, we discuss with women how insidious location recognition systems can be. If a woman suspects that there's some spyware application installed on her mobile, we recommend restoring it to factory settings after saving all the important data. Later on, we raise their awareness about privacy settings and activity patterns on social media.

_____ *What happens after people's stay at the shelter? Do you ever receive updates from the women you have sheltered?*

We continue to give women guidance after they've moved into their own place for a certain period of time as part of our post-stay support. And yes, again and again women contact us by phone or in person months or years later to tell us how grateful they are for the help we gave them, because without this kind of institution, they might never have been able to find a way out of their violent relationships or seize the opportunity when it came.

_____ *Do the men still sometimes find their women? What happens then?*

Yes, it can happen. If a man or his relatives or acquaintances turn up at the shelter building, we immediately notify the police, who send a patrol car over. If necessary, we work with the woman to apply for an interim order from the district court to keep dangerous persons at a distance.

_____ *Do children ever call instead of their mothers?*

It regularly happens that grown-up children on their mothers' behalf or that acquaintances, girlfriends and relatives make calls for a woman who is being abused. We answer them that the woman should contact us herself, since it's important for us to talk to the victim directly and find out her point of view, her fears and her wishes. **You can only help a victim of violence if she herself is willing to accept help.**

_____ *Why do you think women go back to their men in spite of having been physically abused?*

Many women don't realise at all that they have been mistreated at first, or that they are living in an abusive relationship. **Mental abuse leaves no visible traces.** Abusers are often two-faced: we call this Jekyll and Hyde behaviour. One moment he is a sweet, calm partner (especially in public), and then suddenly he is a cruel, merciless despot. Absolutely opposite personalities can coexist in one and the same person, which complicates the woman's ability to correctly perceive the situation: "No way could my darling partner mistreat me."

A woman can take a long time to come to the realisation that she is being abused. "He doesn't beat me, that is, it's not violence or it's not that bad." At the same time, she doesn't notice how she is being drawn further into the spiral of violence. If they do notice changes, they often think they're the ones to blame, and they try to understand the man — they love him — they come up with justifications for his actions. Many are waiting for "the final straw", such as beating children or cheating on her with another woman, before they will end the relationship. But by this point, the woman is often already so dependent and oppressed that, on the one hand, she's afraid of what might happen (revenge or even the abandoned partner killing himself) if she ends the relationship, and on the other hand, she doesn't have the courage or any plan for how her to manage her life and take control of it if completely left to get by on her own responsibility. And unfortunately, at first glance, returning to or staying in a violent relationship seem to be the easiest way to go for many victims.

_____ *What are the biggest challenges you face in your work?*

In the morning you never know how the day will turn out. It's impossible to predict what a victim will tell you in any given call or consultation, or what the story might be behind it. We're manning the phones around the clock, 365 days a year. To spontaneously tune in to a completely new situation in a second requires sensitivity and experience.

_____ *What support and assistance measures for women's shelters would you like to receive from the Austrian state? And what aspects of state support are already satisfactory?*

Adequate funding for counselling and preventative work is important. We have a relatively good situation in Upper Austria, thanks to the consolidation of women's shelters under the social assistance law. Efforts are underway to expand the network of women's shelters (creating a total of 18 additional places) and make improvements. In other federal states, on the other hand, the employment situation, with fixed-term contracts or even jobs under new conditions, is creating great job insecurity for women.

It is good and important that there are educational campaigns on the topic of violence. I'd like to mention here the school workshops on violence prevention funded by the federal state of Upper Austria. Or the nationwide campaign that runs consultations with men and the Association of Autonomous Austrian Shelters for Women (AÖF) under the slogan "Get Help". Here, video billboards in several languages broadcast an appeal to men who are on the brink of turning to violence to seek help before it's too late.

_____ *The topic of gender violence is very delicate and is presented in different ways in the media. How might journalists cover this topic as tactfully as possible? Is it worthwhile talking about violence against women in the media at all?*

Yes, it is worth writing to cover this topic over and over again. Silence won't reduce violence; on the contrary, awareness is shaped through media presence. **Reports of women who have escaped the spiral of violence give other women the courage to break out of their abusive relationships and find a way out as well.** Materials like this that include the contact details of institutions offering assistance and protection are a great help to women in this situation, because they often don't even know that in addition to women's shelters, there are a number of opportunities open to them for getting advice.