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Original Research Article

# My Path to Recovery From Gender-Based Violence: Elusive, Victimized, or Agentive Position **[GQ6]**

**Recto running head** : Albertín-Carbó and Vázquez-Ahumada

**Verso running head** : Violence Against Women XXX (XX)

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## ABSTRACT

**[GQ2] [GQ4] [GQ5]** This article analyzes 10 autobiographical narratives of women who had experienced intimate relationship violence. In these narratives, we find several positions, that come from master narratives. These positions have some effects on the construction of subjectivities and on the process of recovery or redefinition of identity. The positions are (a) elusive, (b) victimized, and (c) agentive. The purpose of this article is to describe and analyze, from a feminist perspective, the position and subjectivity of women who suffer violence to address the prevention and treatment of this problem that affects individuals and society.

## KEYWORDS

- gender-based-violence
- discourses
- subjectivities
- recovering

## Introduction

Abused women's narratives are full of stories of violence and romantic love. These stories are culturally embedded in the discourses that give sense to violence. Cultural constructions about having intimate relationships and what "perfect love" is a function mainly to tie women to abusive relationships (Anderson, 2005; Cala et al., 2009; Neisser, 2003). In his research Neisser reports, "Cultures provide canonical narratives that are both normative and prescriptive about lives and about selves (...)" (2003, p. 2), and these narratives shape the ways people experience their lives. Thome and McLean (2008) exemplify a situational approach to identity that queries the relationship between master narratives, or cultural scripts, and personal narratives.

The master narratives provide a culturally shared evaluative framework that structures moral justifications for abusive behaviors in interpersonal relationships. These narratives are cultural myths and motivations that offer moral ethics and an effective framework to understand certain events, like romantic love, or the importance of not breaking family ties (Thome & McLean, 2008). On many occasions, we explain our experiences, act, and make decisions using these evaluative frameworks referred to by the authors. The abused women in research by Wood (2001) used traditional gender narratives to make excuses for their partner's violence, internalizing expectations that maintained the abuse. These expectations are represented by statements such as "he will get better or stop using drugs," "we will keep the family together," and "I will change and improve our relationship" (Albertín, 2009). Towns and Adams (2000) state that women may be able to "rationalize" men's

behavior as “not really them.”

Wood states that women who had experienced intimate relationship violence make sense of their relationships by using the repertoire of culturally accepted discursive resources, and their narratives “reflect and embody the gender and romance narratives culturally produced, sustained and approved” (Wood, 2001; in Boonzaier, 2008, p. 184). Perfect-love discourses coerce women in a variety of ways to remain in relationships, to stay silent about men's violence, and to attempt to change men. Perfect-love discourse builds up men as dual persons or beast-princes or perfect men (Towns & Adams, 2000).

Among the meanings conveyed in these culturally sustained accounts are those that Boonzaier (2008) refers to as the “infantilization” of women, which has been used to exclude them from the public sphere, but also to limit their actions in the private one, in terms of decision-making, for example. At the same time, the cultural discourse of femininity considers that a woman will fail if she does not stay married regardless of all circumstances. Sanz (1995) shows that in the cultural discourse of femininity, women are educated in love to merge, that is, putting their own value in the choice of the other. That is why women are educated to love and be loved.

Lagarde (2000) corroborates this idea when talking about women as “Conformed as beings for others.” They end up believing that the possibilities of being loved and valued depend on their willingness to accept as truth that the authorized opinion is outside of them and assume subordination and the control of their lives in the hands of others. They may end up confusing the emotional dependence for which they have been programed with unconditional love toward others.

For a woman, these forms of interpreting the world and herself are produced and reproduced over a long period of time through social agreement and are finally assumed as “The Truth,” much like those things that are the way they are because of their nature. Velázquez (2003, p. 25) considers the consequence of this to be that “the facts of violence are minimized, neglected, and are considered as ‘normal’ or ‘habitual’; women's experiences are denied and the responsibility for the intimate partner's aggressive behavior is averted.”

In relation to these concepts, culture plays a very important part not just in the way roles are assigned to individuals, but in the way, context expects them to represent their gender role, depending on the fluctuating circumstances of their lives. From this, it is possible to say that this culturally constructed issue is inseparable from having values and beliefs about subjects. Enander and Holmberg (2008) conclude that although violence is a problem among men as well as women, in social terms, women are made responsible, to a greater extent, for keeping the family “united,” and in consequence, deciding to leave an abusive husband or partner entails a high social cost. Women are also responsible for solving the problem by leaving the abuser. As Enander (2010, p. 9) states, there is “the (social) perception of women as having both the obligation and the possibility to leave an abusive relationship.” Whether they decide to stay or to leave, they have to pay a highest social cost. It is a social double bind: no matter what they do or decide, they will always be stigmatized and accused.

Other reasons are noted, as follows Larrauri (2003) concludes that some women stay with violent partners because they are economically or psychologically dependent. They also fear the violent responses their partners may have toward their children or toward them.

Stark (2007) and Reeves et al. (2023) use the concept of coercive control in abusive intimate relationships. He says that men can use coercive control to extend their dominance over time and through social space in ways that subvert women's autonomy, isolate them, and infiltrate the most intimate corners of their lives. Coercive control serves a rational purpose for men, who insist on personal dominance over their partner as proof of their own masculinity.

Women's adjustment after leaving an abusive relationship involves moving from being controlled to being in control in order to leave an abusive relationship. Anderson et al. (2012) [AQ1] indicate that battered women can exhibit resilience despite enduring intense stressors (e.g., leaving an abusive relationship, living in a shelter, enduring psychological symptoms). For Heister et al. (2023) [AQ2] recovery amounts to empowerment represented in the little things they begin to have control over once the abusive relationship has ended, or they have gone through some form of healing, spiritual and social support are pervasive and beneficial aspects in many individuals' lives, including domestic violence survivors, with direct relevance to mental health and quality of life issues. Recovery has to do with giving power back to survivors (Meyrick & Anning, 2023).

This research aims to know from a feminist perspective: (a) the changes that women experience in a violent relationship while considering the moments they experience and the overwhelming situations from their narratives; (b) which elements, situations, or contexts have activated or produced these changes to understand better their path to empowerment and autonomy and (c) the transformative process of women during the recovery stage in which they have stopped living with their violent partners and are trying to build a new life.

It is hoped that the results can provide essential information for professionals, families, and citizens who accompany women in this process of transformation. Focusing on battered women's recovery provides a good fit with feminist empowerment

practice and the strengths perspective in social work practice as they both recognize and appreciate one's potential for growth in the face of adversity.

## Positions and Subjectivities as a Substrate Where Women's Subjection and Agency Are Constituted

In this article, we will use the concepts of position, speaker position, and subjectivity both to understand the women's mechanisms of subjection or agency in relation to the abusive relationship and to understand the type of analysis carried out on the basis of the information gathered in the interviews conducted with these women.

Davies and Harré (1990) argue that, in the processes of social interaction, a person emerges through discursive practices such as the negotiation of position. They introduce the concept of *position* to focus on the dynamic aspects of interactions rather than static aspects involving concepts such as role (behavior that is expected of someone according to the position they occupy in a social-institutional context). Assuming one particular position involves a dialog with other positions that must be considered at different times during activated interactions or associations.

In this sense, women who tell us about their experiences of abuse and recovery, explain different moments they have gone through, especially from mistreatment to separation from the aggressor and liberation, these moments involve different types of interactions, roles, affections, and so on, that constitute the positions.

Iñiguez (1996, pp. 109–110) defines an *enunciative position or speaking position* as a "combination of enunciations said in a context of interaction and conversation, where the power of action stands out over people."

All texts constitute a discourse; they cannot be conceived outside the sociocultural contexts in which they are produced. This means that they are inscribed in specific interdiscursive contexts and reveal historical, social, and intellectual conditions or, more precisely, enunciative positions defined by the discourse.

People activate different enunciative positions on violence according to the context they are in, and, from these positions, they simultaneously construct a position as subject. As noted by Martín and Stenner (2004), both the subject and subjectivity are produced by discourses that understand the system of representing a particular cultural period, what they call fastening. However, this does not mean that subjects simply retransmit hegemonic discourses; rather they are active within their personal and social worlds, exercising their capacity for agency within contexts facilitated by discourses.

*Subjectivity* is a framework of meanings, associations, perceptions, habits, affections, and provisions resulting from the interactions of subjects and of how they build or interpret these through discourses and wishes. Nevertheless, subjectivity does not come from a genuine and individual experience; it is the result of language and meaningful social interactions and power relations (Pujal, 2003). The researchers have empathized with the women's narratives, so that we have tried to embody their feelings, affects, and cognitions as they recounted their experiences.

Butler (2001, 1997) [AQ3] uses the concept of *psychic mechanisms of power* to refer to the self-surveillance of the subject, a dimension linked to affective and emotional processes. Psychic mechanisms of power refer to subjection that works in both real and symbolic ways; a control that is regulated in the intersubjective spaces, where people negotiate meanings, positions and subjectivities, such as women's cultural ideal of femininity or maternity.

## Methodology

The study was carried out through qualitative methodology, using biographical accounts of women who suffer or have suffered gender-based violence.

## Procedure

The research presented in this article was conducted at the state-run Servei Atenció Informació a Dones (Abused Women's Attention Service) and at an NGO that works with abused women. Both centers are located in Girona (Spain) and assist a wide and varied population from large and small towns and cities in the region (Girona and Barcelona). One of the researchers was writing her doctoral thesis on the recovery of women who have experienced intimate relationship violence. Our initial contacts were with a therapist responsible for the previously mentioned service and a social worker who took care of women at the NGO. They offered us the opportunity to get in touch with women they had previously met who were being or had been helped deal with experiences of violence. The researchers presented the objective of the work to each of the women and asked them to do an interview. All informants gave us their verbal consent<sup>1</sup> to be recorded during the interview.

## Study Design, Interviews, and Participants

Attending to these parameters, we collected 10 autobiographical narratives from women who had experienced gender-based violence in an intimate relationship, as [Ettorre \(2005\)](#) and [Duero \(2006\)](#) [AQ4] indicates. The interviews were open-ended and lasted approximately 2 hr each. Conducted in rooms of the two centers, only the participating woman and one of the researchers were present. The different topics addressed in the sessions included family relationships, friends, love relationships, experience with assistance programs (psychological, social, legal), and most of all, how they constructed themselves as women, as mothers, as victims, and how they narrated the violence they had suffered.

We selected the women to be interviewed based on certain criteria, especially considering issues based on intersectional theories ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)) related mainly to nationality, age, and schooling (see [Table 1](#)). These variables can create important differences and inequalities among women, hence the importance of considering their interaction and representation in the sample. Relevant criteria for selection of the sample were that these women be in a separation process from their violent partners and in a recovery stage.

**Table 1.** Biographical Narratives From Abused Women.

Name/nationality	Age	Separation from partner (time)	Living with partner (time)	Children	Schooling/job
Lena (Spain)	49	5 years	26 years	1 girl (27)	High school/house-cleaning
Miriam (Spain)	20	8 months	4 years	1 girl (15 months)	High school: tried to study pharmacy but quit/unemployed
Isa (Holland)	42	5 years	18 years	1 boy (16); 1 girl (8)	Bachelor's degree/financial assessment
Ana (Uruguay)	42	2 years	8 years	1 girl (5)	High school/physical trainer
Paula (Spain)	48	4 years	18 years	1 boy (10); 1 girl (13)	Pharmacy technician/pharmaceutical industry
Angu (Spain)	38	5 years	12 years	2 boys (12, 14)	Primary school/house-cleaning
Radia (Morocco)	38	1 year	22 years	1 girl (20); 1 boy (18)	Primary/house-cleaning, bar.
Tere (Spain)	51	2 years	4 years	1 boy (30, with a different partner)	Shop assistant
Urbia (Spain)	31	1 year	11 years	2 boys (10, 6), 1 girl (3)	Primary/works in a bar
Pilar (Spain)	47	3 years	20 years	1 boy (8)	Primary/housewife

## Analysis

To analyze these narratives, we located their social action structures or "speech positions" by means of three operations ([Albertín et al., 2016](#); [Iñiguez, 2003](#)): (a) differentiation of text-discourse, to get the codes and the implicit meaning of the text, (b) distinction of speaker, that is, "who" conveys that discourse, from which implicit messages, interests, affiliations and values is he using it, which also contributes to the interpretation and ordering, and (c) making the corpus operative, that is, organizing and classifying information by introducing the concept of "intertextuality," which consists of establishing the relationship between the discourses found in the text. From this point on, the enunciative positions emerge.

## Results and Discussion

The enunciative positions found were elusive, victimized, and agentive positions. These positions have common elements with the analysis that [Chaudhry and Bertram \(2009\)](#) make, which proposes women's agency, representations of trauma, and coping mechanisms, categories that develop from psychosocial trauma, critical consciousness, and resistance.

### The Elusive Position

This position tries to ignore, justify, or eliminate signs or indications of abuse. It is the construction of a world in which explanations justify and make sense of violent acts.

#### Ignoring What Is Happening

This position is characterized by avoiding thinking about what is happening due to a "learned helplessness," and consequently, a passivity in action. It's compensated by self-destructive actions on the woman's part, such as using drugs (anxiolytics drugs) and/or alcohol (in one case), or ignoring the facts. For example, in relation to ignoring the facts, one woman's ex-partner and his mother retained her daughter for 5 weeks. She did not know where her daughter was; she could not call her, and she knew nothing about the girl during those 5 weeks. And she "accepts that."

Submissiveness occurs in both mothers and children in relation to a father's power, in many cases due to fear:

...she knows that she mustn't make daddy angry, because daddy will hurt her ... (I, 16)<sup>i</sup> (in reference to the daughter's behavior with the father).

Some women pretend to those around them that everything is fine, and that there are no problems. One woman says:

I don't tell my parents anything, if they knew I don't know what would happen, they can't suspect it because we live far away. (M, 12)

Women look for continuous back and forth of explanations for the violence and possible reasons to explain how those have led the relationship got to that point; all kinds of explanations are constructed, even explanations related to biological and psychological alterations: "...he has a mental problem" (P, 15).

Some studies point to the justification of abuse by mental health or personality problems ([Cala et al., 2009](#); [Cubells et al., 2010](#)).

### Guilt

Women assume responsibility for their partners' behavior because they do not know "how to react" or "how to live up to his expectations." This is evident in the following fragment:

I was like ... I was ... I was blind, I don't know ... I wanted to believe that I loved him, and I wanted to believe that if something went wrong it was my fault, because you feel guilty, what have you done? Why is he that way? Or you try to make him happy. (L, 3)

Moreover, in some cases they state that they are looking for a protective partner, assuming that this is a deficit acquired in childhood:

Certainly, I always looked for a person that played the role of a father to me, the father I didn't have, in some way ... and I needed some protection in my relations. (T, 11)

A feeling of guilt accompanies women in this position, making it impossible for them to look forward. This prevents them from observing or knowing the nature of the problem, anchoring them and focusing them on their own acts, and leaving their partners aside. Women constantly ask themselves "What have I done wrong?" and "Where did I fail?" to the point of assuming the entire agency, all the responsibility, and providing as an explanation the fact of "falling in love," as indicated by the research provided by [Thome and McLean \(2008\)](#) and [Sanz \(1995\)](#).

The feeling of guilt comes from others' appraisals of oneself, which take place and acquire significance over a continuous period. These appraisals may come from their partner or their own family. We must also consider the social conditions that establish women as having a social role to fulfill ([Lagarde, 2000](#)).

Women must meet these social requirements to "feel satisfied as a mother and as a woman":

I have been raised in monogamy in the sense that ... that ... that there is a man in your life, and he is the man you must fight for to keep him by your side, you know? (P, 7)

As mentioned above, this feeling of guilt is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of frustration and sadness for not being “woman enough”:

I thought that I had failed in everything. I was sad because I thought I was not woman enough in that sense. (I, 10)

One of the consequences of violence we have found in our study is a change in abused women's subjectivity, expressed by the women themselves, who feel transformed, little by little, to the point of not being able to take charge of their own lives. Coinciding with [Stark \(2007\)](#) and the term coercive control, the men use strategies of disqualification, of undermining the other's self-esteem, of stoking fear and increasing pressure to fulfill established social roles at any cost.

All the aforementioned constitute the construction of psychological abuse, which damages the configuration of the “self” narrated by these women:

My brother-in-law told me, “after 2 months of being with him you were another person. It wasn't you anymore.” (T, 6)

## Expectations of Transforming Their Aggressor

At the same time, a phenomenon we might call “magical thinking” is a fantasy that women have of transforming not their own subjectivity but their partner's, which they realize is not adequate. They consider themselves to be the ones who will manage to transform the abuser through effort and dedication, and especially through the love that binds them, as if love could transform anything. Some women say:

I will change him, because with how much he loves me, how can he not change for me? (T, 2)

They have also found an incomparable love, “the love of their life,” which they must maintain:

I have found the love of my life, at last. He's nice, kind, lovable ... the best. (T, 1)

Based on this magical thinking, women look for help from a therapist or mediator placing all their hopes for change in this. As you say [Enander and Holmberg \(2008\)](#), they are also responsible for solving the problem and maintaining the family unit. In this position, women maintain a series of common beliefs, which include assuming that a father or husband is not capable of hurting, that violence is just the consequence of the wrong time and the wrong place, or something that goes beyond themselves and their control.

It is just ... you cannot imagine, you don't believe it's true, and even when you have a doubt inside, in the end you say “No! It isn't possible! How could he hit the children? How could he hit my son, who is also his son? How could he hurt him..?” (I, 10)

## Open the Eyes

Despite avoiding situations that are causing irreparable harm, certain indicators start to have effects on abused women. These are preventive mechanisms functioning outside of them, such as loved ones they do not want to be harmed and want to be kept apart, or family and friends who give them warnings about the situation:

...my parents said, “Do something!” (I, 7)

However, it is just a warning and does not go beyond that. In this position, women use the resource of recounting stories of severe violence as a means of helping themselves “open their eyes.” These stories represent a collection of elements and experiences that gradually situate the violence outside themselves, making it possible to look at these events as material objects that can be observed and analyzed, and consequently breaking away from the idea that they are the only ones responsible for the violence that they felt initially:

I still have my birthday candles packed, because on each of my birthdays there was a problem ... it was my fault, yeah right, according to him, of course ... I'm telling you, I preferred not to have parties, but he was nice and sweet when he wanted to be, and persuaded me. (L, 26)



Basically, the elusive position aims to eliminate the pain that has been caused and to achieve this, it avoids recalling and being aware, and it avoids looking at the conflict when the signs of abuse appear. The only way of avoiding this pain is to look the other way and separate it from themselves, not to bear the emotional and cognitive burden that intimate relationship violence entails.

I have my diaries that are ... when I read them ... it is very painful, very, very, very painful...  
(P, 4)

According to [Abeyasekera \(2017\)](#), the discourses of suffering, sacrifice, and "living for others" predominate, but totalizing violence did not reduce women to mere passive sufferers. Women as mothers, daughters, and sisters, are primarily driven by survival imperatives, as we have seen.

## The Victimized Position

In this position, women recount their pain, their negative emotions, and the abuse and oppression they have suffered at the hands of their ex-partners and the context in which they lived. It is a position that also makes visible the effects of both primary and secondary victimization (inflicted by the legal system and social services). At the same time, here we find discourses aimed at explaining violence and women's dependence on their abusers, their identity and the emotions that accompany this part of the process, as [Larrauri \(2003\)](#) also points out in his work. At this stage, we also found the resources that the interviewed women created to abandon their abusers.

Our research includes many instances of women recounting their deep sense of unease and the critical occasions where abuse (emotional, psychological, and/or physical) took place. These accounts led us to empathize with these women and their pain, which is renewed each time the accounts are retold. They offer a range of emotions through the details of the description and nonverbal language that the woman they describe incorporates.

Within the situations analyzed, we have cataloged abuse according to its different faces. It is important to distinguish between abuse that has occurred during the relationship and abuse occurring after the relationship has ended.

## Abuse That Happened During and After the Relationship

The manifestations are multiple. They have to do with insults, humiliation, disdain, and threats as verbal forms of harm; or with behaviors of deprivation, abandonment, and isolation on the part of the abuser; or with aggressive physical actions such as forced sex, physical violence against women, physical and psychological harm to children, taking children away, and even the economic exploitation of women.

### Insults, humiliation

Insults and humiliation aimed directly at victims and, on many occasions, in front of children constitute a double or triple abuse (when children are also insulted or harmed) with extremely negative consequences for the offspring:

But it's just a cup of coffee! The same as every morning... I made him another and he threw it again against the wall: "You can't even make a cup of coffee!!!" "You see how stupid your mother is? That she can't even make a cup of coffee ... she's not worth anything, she's shit ... (I, 11)

### Disdain

Among the various examples of this, we have chosen one where the man's family shows disdain for the woman, rejecting her:

"We loved you because you are with him, but now you're here, we don't ... you are a loose woman," they told me, even when I have given him a daughter, right? And he always said the same thing to me: "You're a slob. I found you on the street." (A, 10)

### Deprivation

One of the women explains how her partner kept her away from music because he did not like it: I was kept away from music for 18 years (I, 28).

### Isolation

As with the other cases, isolation is another form of abuse, where the victim is not allowed to have contact with others. She is kept under a man's control and in fear, making her incapable of telling others what she is going through:



... and hitting me with his slipper, threatening with his belt ... when we moved to the new house, I thought: "We'll build a home; he will be happier because he wants to be in the countryside, so we'll make a home in the countryside"... and I didn't realize that he'd taken us to the farthest place he could have found ... I could cry, shout, scream and no one would hear us ... there were no houses around!!! (I, 5)

### Threats

He threatened to tie a rope around my neck and throw me into the ocean with a rock (M, 6).

### Forced sexual relations

Even though many women do not equate sexual violence with intimate relationship violence, when they finally break up with their partners, they realize they have been sexually abused:

...and his threats began ... "If you don't come home right now, you'll see," and then the threats, of course, if I didn't come home right away then that night, he forced me to have sex, there was uneasiness at home ... and there comes a point when you start avoiding things, you avoid going out, at night ... with friends... (I, 4)

### Physical violence

Besides, my ex-husband is ... tall and strong; he was a boxer, you know? He knew how to hit me without leaving any marks ... I had a hard time. (A, 4)

### Physical and psychological harm to children

Many experts, in organizations such as *Save the Children*, claim that although children are often assumed to be indirect victims in situations of domestic violence, the children who live with the couple and witness the violence are in fact, like the women, direct victims:

...because when there was a conflict I stepped between my son and my husband ... but with the little one, 30 months old ... she said "I fell off the bed," but there was no possibility of that happening; and the next week her nose was swollen and "I fell again mommy" ... and no matter how much I looked, there was no way she could have fallen and been hurt like that... (I, 2)

### Taking children away

Children are used to harm women. Taking children away from their mothers is a resource that abusers use:

...And when I arrived there, they took everything from me: they took my daughter away from me (I had to work ... they didn't let go me into their house to take my child with me ... he was the one who picked her up.). (A, 12)

### Taking advantage, exploitation

Another form of abuse is men using women for their own benefit:

He would have left me, I know now if I hadn't taken care of his disabled child ... it was perfect for him: he knew me, he could trust me, and we raised the kid ... I was so in love with him ... (L, 8)

### Abandonment

In one case a young woman was left to walk 20 min home from work in the middle of the night (4 a.m.) because the man did not want her to work and in the end left her on the street in the cold winter with her baby daughter:

"And you'll stay in the street until I say so," but he didn't think that at 4 a.m. in winter—it was December—it is really cold, and she was a baby ... she was always sick, with colds and those things... (M, 2)

It is important to note that even when women do not live with their abusers anymore, in many cases the abuse continues, and

this constitutes a serious difficulty for women and children in their recovery process since they are not free from the persecution and the feelings of fear, outrage, and pain.

He now has a website against me. (M, 12)

I used to sleep with a knife under the pillow because at that point I was ... I came back with my daughter, two suitcases and the official family registration booklet and the clothes I was wearing. Nothing else. (A, 4)

Hydén (1999) argues that fear of the husband is not only something that hinders women but could also be seen as a form of resistance on the part of women. Fear does not necessarily include action, but it contains an unarticulated knowledge of what is wanted and what is not wanted. The fear narratives were read as narratives of resistance to violence.

## Reacting to Abuse

The process of reacting to abuse in the victimized position is characterized by an initial stage of surprise due to the aggressive behavior of the partner contrasting with their apparently amorous and kind nature at the beginning of the relationship. This hostility becomes normalized at a certain point in the relationship:

...and there comes a time when you think that everything is normal... (I, 3)

In Velázquez's research (2003), women also consider that acts of violence are minimized, neglected, and considered "normal" or "habitual." In this excerpt, a woman reveals the stages of the victimization process:

...at first, I cried a lot. I cried like I'd never done in my entire life, because ... besides you want to hide it. ... During the second stage, I shut up. ... And then, in the third stage, I answered back to everything he said, I said everything I thought, never yelling or anything, and that made him very nervous ... and one day I got tired. (T, 4, 5)

## Breakup and Victim Status

In the victimized position, the breakup is an important stage in the recovery process, and it usually happens when women feel that their or others' safety is threatened, when they cannot restrain things anymore, or when they feel tired of keeping the relationship the way it is. It is a significant moment when, although the intention is to put an end to the abuse, the possibility of an empty future is frightening:

...I'm telling you, it was harder to leave him than the illness itself (leukemia) and all the things that might have happened, you know? (L, 9)

Assuming the condition of the victim is characteristic of this position. In the studies reviewed, Cobb (1997) also points out the importance of being a victim and then ceasing to be a victim in the process of recovering from violence. The subject is defined as "destroyed," "sick," "broken," "worthless." And this is not only true for the women themselves, but for offspring, brothers, sisters, parents...

...now I am starting to be the same again, but with my soul broken. He left me broken, and this no one can repair. (T, 11)

...being 12 years old, and ... then ... from that point I saw that I was getting better but not my son ... everything he had inside came out ... the fear he had kept inside, he didn't want to live anymore... (I, 12)

Feelings and emotions are important elements mobilized in the victimized position. We have talked about fear, which predominates during this time of violent experience, but also appears in other positions. Also clearly expressed are other feelings, emotions, and mental states: anger, confusion, distrust, frustration, and guilt, which is assumed as a responsibility for not having left earlier and all the resulting consequences. We have found in other studies that women assume that they are responsible for keeping the family "together" and, consequently, the decision to leave an abusive husband or partner carries a high social cost (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Larrauri, 2003).

## Narratives of Victimization

In this position, women use certain elements to explain and comprehend why abuse exists in their lives, and why some

people abuse others. These explanations are based on the nature of the relational bond established between women and men. Thus, in the case of those who abuse, the explanation is related to bad childhood relationships that might have harmed abusers and left a mark on them.

The explanations women give for their own behavior are related to the deep emotional dependence they have on their abusers. This bond oscillates between love (being in love) and the need to satisfy a feeling of emptiness. Their deep desire to be “the princess of the fairytale” (which is related to the socially established gender role for women), or living for the desire of the other, as Renzetti et al. (2001) explain. Out of this comes the need for the other and the impossibility of leaving him.

I used to do everything for him ... I thought for him, lived for him ... I don't know ... I don't know, everything was for him ... (I) was ... was ... I wanted to be like he wanted to see me ... without any personality of my own ... I had my own mind! But from when I started a relationship with him until I left him, my brain was his... (L, 17)

He made me feel like a princess. He made me feel different, like in a fairy tale. (M, 4)

On the other hand, there is pressure from the abuser's family or family is ignoring signs of abuse in a friend's relationship. Family relationships often naturalize the playing out of violent masculinity and violated femininity (Mitra, 2013), although a woman's family could help as an incentive or provide psychological and material support during the process of breaking up the violent relationship.

An important discourse in the victimized position stems mainly from the judicial system, which, although providing protection for abused women, also constructs an image that ties women down, restraining them to a passive role. As shown by other research, women's experiences with the judicial system are far from satisfactory, since the system itself subjects them to secondary victimization (or revictimization) due to a lack of gender perspective and sensibility to their suffering, not to mention the ingrained assumption that women lie (Albertín, 2009).

Moreover, family relationships often naturalize the playing out of violent masculinity and violated femininity (Mitra, 2013), although a woman's family could help as an incentive or provide psychological and material support during the process of breaking up the violent relationship.

Although staying in the victimized position for too long may be harmful and may delay the abused woman's recovery, this stage has an important function. Through their own narratives of the abuse, women can conceptualize themselves as victims and the relationship as a violent one.

Focusing only on victimization provides only a partial view of the reality of violence in women's lives. To address these problems, Hollander (2005) integrates a discussion of resistance against violence, which is related to the agentive position.

## The Agentive Position

The most important feature of the agentive position is a consolidation of the changes in women's value systems that started during the victimization stage; that is, a change of beliefs and the emergence of an awareness regarding actions that establish a clear contrast between “then” and “now” in abused women's narratives. Along with the change in thinking, there is also a change in behavior.

## A New Emotional and Rational Self

The idea of having been in love disintegrates, as they assume that they were not really in love, or that that love has been transformed into indifference or disdain, depending on the type of relationship they now have with the abuser. It is interesting to note how one of the interviewed women talks about the false hope she built up during the time she lived with her abuser:

I have never been happy with this man ... never. I'm telling you, the few times I was happy were because I made it all up, in the sense of saying “We've been here, we've had a great time together, we've done this and that” but in fact I was just there because I served him as a front to do his business... (L, 9)

At the same time, when they talk about love, it is more rationalized than in other positions, where we have found that the bond is more like affective dependence. In the following account, the interviewee talks about a “mental” more than an “emotional” rupture. Emotional rupture would be characteristic of the victimized position:

Because to me, what was more difficult was to establish a mental separation from him ... can you

believe it? (L, 2)

In this position, women establish a series of fundamental certainties for their lives. These certainties range from avoiding pain as much as possible, to being in peace, to the desire for them and their children to be accepted. These elements become the fundamental axis that rules their lives:

I don't want anything that harms me; I have learned to take it out of my life. I don't know how to tell you, but I have changed, I have changed a lot. (T, 16)

Closely linked to this certainty is the idea that the man with whom she had shared the experience of love-abuse cannot change:

What I have learned in these two years is that I cannot have him because he can't change, and since he can't change, I have had to accept it, and that's what I have learned. (T, 22)

It is noteworthy that different moments from the process of violence overlap, where emotion, rationalization, and concrete actions interact in a kind of recursive spiral. During this recurring dynamic, the women's notion of "self" is rebuilt, and their subjectivity is redefined. In other words, their self-concept is reconstructed.

## Sharing Experiences With Other Women

The changes in women's value systems result from a raised awareness based on their own experiences and those of others. In fact, women expressed their unease when they came across other narratives of abuse with which they could identify:

For instance, I saw it reading other accounts from other women who have suffered the same as me... (I,1)

At the same time, this value system implies a change in behavior, which leads to "empowerment," showing themselves that they can do it:

I kept the house, cut the firewood ... "What the hell! I can do it!" and (the therapist) always said "You can do it" and then I started to realize that I could do things, even when he had always said the opposite... (I, 19)

In addition, valuing certain actions, such as enjoying positive relationships, having the freedom to "have a voice," not surrendering, and so on, constitutes a network that adjusts to shape a "renewed" identity and a new and transformed subjectivity characteristic of this position.

(Talking about her daughter): because she has to learn ... that life is very hard, that you can't always cry, you have to get up and continue ... and if she falls again, she gets up again, because if she keeps crying she'll end up like me, accepting all kinds of things, in a corner, crying... (I, 18)

## Identify in the Present and Project in the Future

Women use what they were before, during the abuse, as a reference to help identify themselves in the present and to project into the future: "I am rebuilding myself from what I am." Worth noting are an intense empowerment and a reassume of who they are, both fundamental elements that point directly to their becoming agents of their own lives:

Compared to 5 years ago, I was nobody ... now I wear dresses ... because he didn't allow me to wear a dress or a skirt ... I had to wear jeans, nothing else ... and if I didn't wash it was better. (I, 15)

Fundamentally, this subjectivity or transformed self is characterized by the setting in motion of a sense of trust in others, in the world. At the same time, in these accounts, women show their need to feel credible, to know that others believe their story. This is particularly true with respect to their therapists if they have gone through a process of professional help:

I needed someone to understand what I was going through, a moral support, not to resolve my life, because I could do it myself, but I needed someone to believe in me, you know? (L, 3)

It is important to note that as well as their need to be seen as credible, they start believing in a new value system, in which

the therapist's voice functions as the acknowledged voice, the authorized voice that will introduce them to that new value system. At the same time, in the agentive position, women develop a sense of indifference toward abusive ex-partners.

This process triggers an important element: the building of a support network comprising parents, children, friends, and so on, that helps women during the separation process, but also in their empowerment and development of agency.

Other important aspects are the future expectations that women project, especially those related to protecting their children or other relatives and, in some cases, being supportive and helpful to other women who are now or have been going through a situation of violence. In this sense, they related many situations where they have helped other women directly or indirectly.

I have a Facebook profile where I put information for women, human rights, information for young women, about things men do... (I, 17)

Among these future expectations, economic independence and work also play an important role, as they are vital resources to complete the recovery process. The ability to earn one's own income is important in order to escape from victim status:

If I hadn't had this economic capacity to deal with all these situations, then I don't know how I would have paid all these expenses ... the lawyer and all that ... I don't know how ... and all the family expenses... (P, 20)

[Hester et al. \(2023\)](#) investigate how reparation involves offering the victim some compensation, such as financial/economic compensation, (re)gaining access to housing, and having therapy.

As many researchers have previously established ([Hydén, 2005](#); [Pujal, 2003](#); [Renzetti et al., 2001](#); [Thome & McLean, 2008](#)), we establish our identity, who we are, through the narrative we make of ourselves. In this sense, it is interesting that, in order to arrive at this position, there are reflections and reelaborations of the women's identity, as they narrate a change in their lives, and above all having ceased to be submissive, to make their own decisions and to follow their own desires. As they explain to us, they have recovered their "former selves," "the people they used to be," before suffering violence, before having lived with an abuser. They feel stronger, they have their destiny in their hands, and they visualize themselves as capable of preserving their freedom.

## Conclusions

We have shown how women who have suffered intimate relationship violence mobilize three basic positions through their accounts of their experience: the elusive, victimized, and agentive positions. These positions correspond to three different stages in their experience of violence: the elusive position appears at the beginning of the relationship; the victimized position when women become aware of violence but still cannot change the situation; and the agentive position is when women are in the recovery stage. Women who have shared their experience of violence have gone through all three positions, oscillating at different times between one and the other. These positions are close to the three overlapping processes identified by [Enander and Holmberg \(2008\)](#): Breaking, Releasing, and Understanding.

Deciphering this interplay of positions will help to understand and guide the recovery process and to explore in which stage of the experience women find themselves and what emotions and perceptions they have. This knowledge allows both abused women and the people who give support—therapists, social workers, lawyers, family members—to adjust the support they give.

Each position defines a subject and a context of violence. The women in the elusive position consider the context of pain as being, at the same time, the context of love, where violence can be ignored, naturalized, normalized, or considered temporary, and transformed if those involved take action. Subjects are defined: she is the one responsible for the violent acts (guilt), doing things to make him lose control, but also the one who will save him; he justifies himself (she also justifies the abuser) by talking about the "wrong time and place," his bad temper, mental illness: problems with possible solutions. At this stage, the abuser is not seen as having any agency or responsibility. In the elusive position, pain is acknowledged, but not made explicit; it is obviated, hidden or forgotten, in a denial that something is happening.

In the victimized position, a context is built where the woman victim is recognized as such. This victim has no escape and fear is present, oppression and forced actions are common, and the victim, to avoid greater harm, starts losing the capacity to react, to decide, and becomes harmless, passive, and nonassertive. Her actions are aimed at protecting herself or her children (security, livelihood). The abuser becomes her only reference point. Women's narratives revolve around the abuser and his actions.

In the agentive position, the context of violence is replaced by the possibility of freedom, of choice. Every act that could

harm her is rejected and kept at a distance. The woman rebuilds her sense of “self” in a new way, from the ashes of her previous identity; this new “self” becomes an empowered “self,” reinforced by the level of experience and self-awareness obtained from reflecting on her own life story. Nevertheless, others’ support is crucial to this new construction of subjectivity.

Within each position, there is a wide spectrum in the intensity of the experiences and not always all the situations narrated occur, so for example, in the elusive position, there are women who focus a lot on the emotional dependence on the abusive man, and others who relate it as a role preestablished by a social mandate (as noted by [Boonzaier, 2008](#); [Lagarde, 2000](#)), especially in the latter case highlights the testimony of some women more submissive to culture or tradition.

In the victimized position we also find different moments, especially the “outbreak of violence” that coincides with the phase of “tension” or escalation of violence defined by Walder in the “cycle of violence” ([Walker, 1980](#)), but there are many other psychologically and socially hard moments, as specified in the results. The fear of the reaction of the abusive partner, or the learned helplessness in front of that reaction, are feelings that are intermingled in this position.

In the agentive position, there are also different gradients, going from having thoughts of “realizing” the unfairness of the situation toward her, and particularly toward her children, to adopting liberating behaviors that prepare the way for the definitive rupture.

## A Reading of Our Results From a Feminist Perspective

In the women's narratives, emerging accounts of romantic love, emotional dependence, submissiveness, self-blaming and the caregiver role, along with the need for protection by a stronger man, link with the social and cultural mandates of “being a woman,” “being a wife” and “being a mother.” This socially constructed condition involves the subjectivity of women and predisposes them to be victims of violence. While this discourse is made explicit in the elusive and victimized positions, the agentive position offers a glimpse of elements of change, possibilities for transformation, and a twist in the desires and needs of the self. Women perceive the power to transform and change their situation, as well as the capacity to resist and construct new visions of their lives and themselves. Here this discourse connects with the gender perspective, which itself aims to create an awareness, to question power structures, and to help in the recovery process by working on “emotional and corporal” elements (in the face of the masculine hegemony of the “rational”) and empowerment the subject through his or her subjectivity. On this basis, it is possible to understand from a psychosocial practice that a gender perspective can contribute much to both the prevention and recovery processes of women who have experienced intimate relationship violence.

## Limitations

To finish, make visible a limitation of the study, related to the number of participants and their intersectionality conditions ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)). Even though the women in the sample who come from countries outside of Spain have the same social status as the women of Spanish nationality, it is necessary to consider questions of religion, age and other variables that intersect with the gender that would need to be assessed more specifically in future studies. An intersectional feminist perspective can help to understand the diversity of situations within a discursive positioning, positions marked by social class, religion, ethnicity, age, and other axes of inequality or privilege.

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## Notes

1. The study was carried out between 2016 and 2019, when written consent was not required. ✘
2. (I, 16) (Name initial, interview page). ✘

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