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The Village of Mothers and Children in Milan: A review of a successful community model

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Abstract

In 1945 Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi founded the Village of Mothers and Children, which still exists today in Milan's experimental QT8 neighbourhood. The Village was the first structure of its kind to welcome single mothers with their children, giving them the opportunity to remain together and be able to plan their future. The objectives were to maintain the integrity and continuity of the mother-child relationship. The approach was non-religious and non-institutional. The Village supported single mothers in having a serene pregnancy accompanying them both during and after childbirth. This nurtured and enhanced the psycho-emotional development of the child and preserved the child's ability to cultivate significant relationships with others. From this unique experience, the sense of belonging to a community was born. This paper presents some initial findings from a preliminary study based on available documentation and interviews with key persons involved in Village life from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. These findings are of relevance as figures suggest child abandonment in Europe is currently increasing, compounded by the global socio-economic crisis. It is important to return to the pedagogical theory and practice delivered by the Village in order for us to re-learn how to create a sense of sustainable identity and community for the global future.

Keywords: *single mothers, abandonment, village, community building*

The issue of social exclusion continues to be at the top of national agendas, linking in to education policies and strategies as set out by Europe 2020 and the Millennium Development Goals. However, women and children still remain in poverty on the margins of society, unable to participate fully as actors in their lives and their communities, impacting thus on health and the economy and consequently on social inclusion (UNICEF, 2010). In her poem *A tale begun* the Polish Nobel Prize winning poet Wisława Szymborska said, 'the world is never ready for the birth of a child' (Szymborska, 2009, p. 471). If these words rang true following World War II, they ring ever more fiercely today in a Europe facing economic, political, social and cultural crisis where child and baby abandonment figures are steadily increasing (Amici dei Bambini, 2008). In fact the number of baby 'hatches' or 'cots' in hospitals are growing in an attempt to support mothers in distress and unable to take care of their child. They aim to contrast mortality rates of newborns being left in unsafe places where they would otherwise face certain death. This is a controversial solution often discussed in different national headlines as it reminiscent of the 'wheel of foundlings' whereby illegitimate or unwanted babies were placed in a special box, often by a church, and where a bell would be rung to call for help (Boswell, 1991). The modern, thermo-regulated hatch can now be found in hospitals and heat sensors detect the presence of the baby, setting off an alarm notifying staff. Information leaflets and posters in different languages are also

made available to inform the mother of her and the child's rights as well as where to go to get help on a variety of issues. Data from Italy on the phenomenon of baby abandonment and teenage pregnancy will be briefly presented, in particular the town of Milan. Furthermore the Village of Mothers and Children set up by Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi will be presented as a model still operating in the 21st century, supporting pregnant women and girls, their newborn children and their life together.

Italian data on baby abandonment and teenage pregnancy

Italian legislation protects the mother and newborn child (Constitution Art. 31), who are both considered to be different persons with their own specific rights (Constitution Art. 2). When she gives birth in hospital, the woman has the right to express her will and choose not to recognize her baby from the time of its birth, whether she is married or single. However, it is considered a crime to abandon a newborn even if the mother is experiencing difficulty and distress, whether due to socio-economic or health reasons. She also has the right of anonymity (Penal Code Art. 326 and Art 622). The future mother is to be informed of her rights as well as the options available to her. The Italian Civil Code recognizes the newborn baby as a person and therefore attributed juridical capacity (Civil Code Art. 1). In other words he or she is entitled to rights first of all as a human being, the inviolable rights of the person, the right to a name (Civil Code Art. 6), citizenship, education (Constitution Art. 30) and the right to grow up in a family, even if different from that of origin.

Statistics for baby abandonment are unreliable and difficult to collect given the nature of the phenomenon. The National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) has been quoted by news reports as counting 3000 cases in 2011. Moreover since 1997, the Institute has no longer published data pertaining to 'unknown parents'. In Italy between 1993 and 2006 approximately 400 babies were not recognized by their mothers each year, 84 of which in the region of Lombardy alone according to a study carried out by the service Madre Segreta of the Province of Milan (Guarnieri et al, 2009). A common trend on the national, regional and provincial level is that there is no constant occurrence of the phenomenon nor can it be claimed that fluctuations are proportional to birth rates. In fact we have a peak in 2006 with 499 newborns (0.06%) not being recognised nationally, 109 (0.09%) in Lombardy and 53 in Milan and its province.

The phenomenon of teenage pregnancy in Italy is still kept rather quiet given issues surrounding female sexuality, the shame of illegitimacy and also attitudes toward violence. According to a report by Save the Children in 2011 figures for teenage pregnancy remained constant between 2000-2009. In 2008, mothers under the age of 18 represented 0.44% of the population while those under 20 represented 1.77%. These numbers are quite low compared to the number of births. With regard to France and the UK for mothers under 18, we have 0.67% and 1.80% respectively whereas for mothers under 20 years of age we find 2.80% of the population in France and 2.80% in the UK. Furthermore according to this report there are over ten thousand teenage mothers in Italy of which 2500 are minors. The majority are Italian (82%) and come from the southern regions (71%). The average age at the time of birth is between 16 and 17. It has been revealed that 60% are married or live with a partner of roughly the same age, between 18

and 21. For 32% of teenage mothers, the father has not recognized the newborn baby. Only 19% of teenage mothers have a job and many have dropped out of school or left their studies after pregnancy (Save the Children, 2011).

Villaggio della Madre e del Fanciullo

The following information has been compiled mainly based on Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi's publications and individual interviews which took place in March 2012 with women who frequented the Village in different capacities during the mid 1970s to mid 1980s. Among the former employees are included: social worker, educator and gynaecologist. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Participants were contacted through *La Libreria delle Donne* in Milan as well as women who had used the Village's services in the past as external users. The women were posed three questions. They were asked to: tell an anecdote related to Elda Scarzella, talk about their experience of Village life and to reflect on what they had learned during their time at the Village and how that would affect their work in the future. A narrative style has been adopted in this report given that this study is still in a preliminary phase and not all data has been gathered and fully analysed. It is hoped that this will not deter the reader's interest from learning about the value of Milan's *Villaggio della Madre e del Fanciullo*.

Any study into the Village of Mothers and Children, known outside of Italy also as the Garden of Mothers and Children, would not be complete without first acknowledging its founder, Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi, who despite numerous challenges boldly carried forward her vision and what she called her 'intuition' (Scarzella, 1985). In post-war Italy, this woman created a female universe and adopted a feminine approach with regard to the support of young mothers and their newborn babies. Avant-garde for her time and even the present day, Elda Scarzella operated by putting children at the centre of society and empowered women to claim back their subjectivity during their time of pregnancy and their life after.

Elda Mazzocchi (1904-2005) was born in a family where the seeds of democracy were sown and nurtured daily. Her father Cesare Mazzocchi was an architect and a self-proclaimed atheist while her mother Isabella Bossi was a teacher and a catholic. Together with her siblings she was taught the importance of respecting others as well as encouraged to follow her own, at times indomitable, spirit. Before starting their day, they would gather around the breakfast table reciting verses from Pascoli and other poets. Truth was always sought as the best means of communication, no matter how difficult emotionally, and explained in terms understandable to the children. The family was also physically active. Father and daughter would go mountain climbing and it is here that Elda discovered the freedom of wearing trousers which she continued to wear while working at the Village, which was unheard of during that time (Scarzella, 1998). She will later be remembered by the people who knew her or of her as a striking beauty, towering over others and always dressed in different shades of purple. It was impossible not to notice her presence. This was a constant element that arose during all interviews.

After her marriage to Enzo Scarzella, she moved to Sardinia with her husband. This was a land of extreme socio-economic hardship because of its position away from the

mainland. Elda would start her social work in her local community helping the poor and setting up a school that also provided meals for the children. At the time of her first pregnancy she came to know of *la ruota degli esposti* or wheel of foundlings and this was to mark her profoundly. Following her return to Milan Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi was involved in helping refugees and after the liberation on 25th April 1945 she organised the welcome at Milan's central train station of those returning from the war. Among the thousands of people were also many pregnant women and young girls, victims of the atrocities of violence and rape. During this time in history, their only option would have been to be placed in institutions, bearing the burden of their shame hidden away from society. They would be forced to wear uniforms, share their room with a number of other women and they would not be free to go as they pleased. After the birth, mother and child would be separated as the child would be given away for adoption. These women and young girls would continue to suffer the process of victimization, this time induced by society.

It was in response to this human tragedy that Elda Scarzella decided to set up the Village of Mothers and Children on 12th October 1945. The philosophy of the Village was that no mother should be separated from her child, that the mother was responsible for the care of her child and that no distinction should be made between married and single mothers. The only condition of entrance to the Village was that the women and young girls fully accept their pregnancy. Upon opening, the Village took in 35 women and 24 children (Scarzella, 1950).

The first location of the Village was in Palazzo Sormani, the municipal library, closed because of damage caused by the bombings. Six pre-fabricated units were donated by Antonio Greppi, Mayor of Milan and placed under the trees in the inner courtyard and garden. They were organized so that each pregnant woman and young girl could have her very own room where she could stay and be with her child even after the birth. They would be allowed to come and go as they pleased, see who they wanted and they did not have to wear a uniform. They were not considered to be 'assisted', rather they were considered as 'guests' of the Village. This would be an important factor as it gave back dignity to the person. Furthermore, the guests would also support each other, each in light of their own capacities or state of pregnancy.

The Village was structured so as to create a small thriving community. There was an area for dressmaking and other workshops so that the women could make clothes for their children as well as learn practical skills to help them reach economic independence in the future. There was also an area for laundry, a kitchen and dining area and a nursery, where Elinor Goldschmied, social worker and child psychologist, carried out important work with the children based around play and developing social skills. Later in 1957 when the new Village (designed by Elda's son the architect Alberto Scarzella) moved to the experimental QT8 neighbourhood, she would set up the nursery in the Village, open to the guests and external users. The actual layout of the nursery would allow for child observation for trainees and scholars.

Elda had her office on the ground floor of the main building of Palazzo Sormani overlooking the courtyard and she called it the Observatory because she claimed several times that her job was to observe the whole person so as to be able to properly carry out

her work (Scarzella, 1998). From the Observatory she also set up the auxiliary body of the Tribunal of Minors, which over the years was involved with adolescent delinquency (Scarzella, 1952), dealing with social inclusion and education. Over the years courses were run in sexual health and substance misuse.

The women and young girls were supported throughout all the stages of their pregnancy and for a time the Birthing House was fully operational until it was forced to close down due to lack of funds and also later by the authorities. It was designed as a small apartment, with a birthing room, a pool, a kitchen and sleeping area. It would offer a natural transition for the women and girls staying at the Village and who had also been prepared for the birth with breathing techniques and exercises. They would be surrounded by persons they knew and trusted who would guide them in this life changing event. Frederick Leboyer, the French obstetrician was also invited to run seminars sharing his knowledge of non-violent births, such as keeping the lights low and speaking softly. The environment was safe, non-clinical and filled with love. The mothers would also be able to keep their child close to them, maintaining physical contact and make their own choices with regard to breast-feeding and care. They would also be protected from the judging and unsympathetic eyes of hospital staff who would criticize the single and very young mothers. The chapel bell would be rung after every birth, whether in the birthing house or in hospital. The women and girls were not required to leave the Village following the birth until they had a place to go to and could take care of themselves and their child. From 1945 to 1974, there were 380 births in the Village, with only one death. At the time national statistics put prenatal child mortality rates at 0.79% for legitimate births and 2.5% for illegitimate births (Scarzella, 1998).

It should be noted that this female universe was not a ghetto and as mentioned earlier, the guests were free to come and go, friends and family could visit and many cultural events took place here, bringing the outside world into the Village. Though Elda was undoubtedly the driving force behind the Village, she worked with a strong team, where one day a week was set aside for discussing cases and trying to find the best approach to any issues that may have arisen with the guests or with other people they were supporting outside of the Village (Vigna, 1978). These meetings were rather lively and at times conflictual yet the commitment of all participants was solid. Minutes were always taken of all meetings and stored in the archive, as well as any studies that had been undertaken. It must be mentioned how a lot of work led by Elda was done to re-establish links with the family or friends of the women and young girls. This was to ensure that they would have key people involved in their lives during their time at the Village and after. The educators would be a further source of support as they would live with the women and girls in the houses, teaching life skills and responsible parenting. As they gained in confidence and were able to demonstrate that they were becoming more autonomous, the mothers could move into transitional accommodation in the community, similar to a half-way house, where they could experience greater independence yet continue to have their support network around them (Vigna, 1978). It must be noted that during the interviews it was specified that the guests were mainly girls, at times as young as 12 years of age.

Elda's work was to bring a very important shift in attitudes to what may be referred to today as social work. This might appear obvious to us now but it was groundbreaking for

the time. Its founding principles are today part of theories and models that are commonly shared by those working with children and with a community care set up, such as those of Winnicott and Bowlby. However at the time, in post war Italy, these aforementioned principles were innovative, designed to contrast the attitudes that were in force. In fact the Village was the first structure of its kind to receive single mothers with their children, therefore giving them the opportunity to remain together and be able to plan a future, together, despite being nubile with illegitimate children. Its objective of preserving the integrity and continuity of the mother-child relationship, from an innovative, pedagogical, non-religious and “anti-institutional” viewpoint, turned the Village into a national and international point of interest, both culturally and psycho-pedagogically. Elda travelled extensively promoting the Village and its success stories in Italy and abroad where she gained the respect of her peers. Unfortunately her work was more valued and recognized outside of her country. Educational videos were made by UNICEF and the BBC Radio service also made a broadcast about the Village. In its first 5 years of activity, 187 women were ‘assisted’, 70 of which were married and 117 single. The first were aged 26 on average, the later 24. 166 children were received as well as 12 cases of non-maternity (Scarzella, 1955). An important fact that must be noted is that of all the pregnant women and girls as well as the children that were brought to or were born in the Village, there were no failures. In other words, there was no diminishment in the capacities or competences of the guests, even once they moved on.

The Village today

The history of the Village was troubled by continuous lack of funds as it received no state funding. Elda Scarzella was very active in keeping the Village running through attracting private donations and using her own family funds. At different times parts of the service had to be cut or suspended. Between October 1954 and Spring of 1957 the Village, or rather the Observatory, was actually located at the *Cinema Arte* while the Municipality of Milan found accommodation for the guests. Later, the Birthing House would be closed in 1974 and reopened in 1981. In 1957 the Village moved to the QT8 neighbourhood, in a vast green area. The Village still exists there today and continues to address the needs of pregnant women and young girls. In addition to the independent homes, there is a nursery, a family planning and advice centre and medical services are also offered to the guests and outside users (dietician, counsellor, psychotherapist, obstetrician, pre and post-natal massage). A space has also been created for teenagers, dealing with issues such as stalking and bullying as well as mum and toddler groups.

The following data has been collected from the Village charter of services from 2009 and 2012. In 2008, 13 women and 15 children were admitted while in December 2011 the number of women admitted did not change but the children increased to 18. The mothers that moved on in 2008 were 14 and the children totalled 17, while in 2011 there were 13 mothers and 15 children. The family planning and advice clinic saw 1160 women or young girls in 2008 and in 2011 it saw 2153 women, 1581 of which were of foreign nationality (73.43%). A total of 5827 services were provided in 2008 and 7318 in 2011.

Funding is now guaranteed through the Lombardy region, though certain changes had to be made to the services offered in the Village and to the working ethos. Changes were inevitable also due to the loss of Elda Scarzella Mazzocchi who added her personal flair and energy, but also her knowledge and competence to making her vision for mothers and children a shared reality. It might be worth noting that today the president, vice-president and Village manager are all male inevitably raising the issue of whether the spirit of the Village has remained faithful to its founder. Also the archives and library are currently not made accessible for study. It is hoped that they will be opened soon to the scientific community.

Conclusion

As old and familiar boundaries shift on all levels of the European experience, questions of identity and citizenship have to be re-examined in terms of the new present day realities that we face and that we inevitably pass on to our children. Indeed it could be argued that in order for there to be meaningful and sustainable change our focus must be redirected and become child-centred. The time has come for 'adult society' to re-examine its commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescents and become accountable. Attitudes to women, sexuality and pregnancy must also be reconsidered as they are necessarily entwined with identity and social inclusion. An African proverb says that to grow a child, you need a whole village and in the case of Elda Scarzella's model, the village has bloomed into a garden.

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