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Looking forward to childhood: training professionals working with children exposed to domestic violence

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Abstract

The repercussions of domestic violence are often burdened onto children who inevitably face the challenges of becoming citizens in a world which has not offered them other alternatives of being. This paper presents data on domestic violence in Italy and initial results of a professional training course for teachers and social workers aimed at increasing awareness of the damage caused to children exposed to violence against their mothers. The methodology of Multiple Interaction Team Education (MITE) was adopted during teaching and learning. The instruments used were the manuals for teachers, parents and social workers produced by the Universities of Cyprus, Roma Tre, Oradea and Presov (Daphne III Programme -30-CE-03116350015 Project Code JLS/2008/DAP3/AG/1157). Participants were presented with the research findings and completed a short answer questionnaire identifying three main aspects: issues arising from the research, educational actions that they could promote to prevent children from reproducing violence, operational objectives that they could meet within their organization. The results suggest that teachers and social operators have similar responses in all three aspects: dealing with aggressive/passive behaviour, social isolation, poor scholastic performance (issues); creating safe environments where the child is allowed to express their emotions, being a positive and trustworthy role model, promoting non-violence and cooperative learning (educational); being more attentive to the needs of the child, making colleagues aware and collaborating with parents (operational). Of particular interest was the fear expressed by teachers in making incorrect assessments, breaking up families, acting outside of the limits of their role and responsibility despite their commitment to the child's wellbeing. Mirroring this fear is the frustration highlighted by social operators juggling between the timescales of institutions and those of woman and child elaborating their experience of violence. This paper argues that further training is necessary for adults working with children, to develop and create their full potential as citizens.

Keywords: *Multiple Interaction Team Education (MITE), professional training, domestic violence, childhood.*

Introduction

1. Defining domestic violence

The 1993 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women states that 'Gender-based violence is violence that is directed against a

woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. Furthermore, the 1995 Beijing Declaration (United Nations, 1996, p. 73) states that

the term 'violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life, and that 'violence against women' is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement.

Domestic Violence or Intimate Partner Violence is specific manifestation of violence against women. It refers to behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours. It does not solely consist of individual acts of violence, but rather of a continuum of different forms of abuse over time, alternating between full blown escalation and what has been ironically called the "honeymoon period", when the perpetrator appears to repent of his violent acts and a tenuous calm is momentarily restored in the home.

Domestic violence is a widespread phenomenon that affects all citizens, from the most to the least developed countries. It would be incorrect to assume that its victims are only women. Children are often the silent witnesses of the violence against their mothers, both directly or indirectly, as confirmed by international literature and the stories of women in shelters (UNICEF, 2000; Levendosky et al, 2001; Romito, 2011). If they are physically present at the time of the incident, they may be harmed by trying to protect their mother or by an object thrown with force across the room. They might hide under their bed with a sibling, terrorised by the screams and imagining the worse, too afraid to come out and ashamed of their impotence. Broken glass, a house in upheaval, uncooked meals and a heavy atmosphere may be their only welcome when they come back from school. The domestic violence they experience becomes the guilty secret they share with their mother. This secret isolates both mother and child further away from society, who in turn chooses not to see or who even condemns the women who may have "been looking for trouble" or who "deserved it because they did not leave the relationship". Though not the aim of this paper, it must be stated that our awareness, attitudes and recognition of domestic violence depends upon many factors, such as culture, legislation and education and at times these need to be challenged. How we act, nationally and individually, with regard to prevention, reduction and the elimination of domestic violence is again another challenge we must face, especially if we are involved in citizenship education.

This paper presents the initial results of an experimental professional training course for teachers and social workers. The term social worker has been used for those same professionals, as well as for psychologists, lawyers and project workers from women crisis centres and shelters. The courses were run in Italy, specifically in the Marche

region and aimed at increasing awareness of the damage caused to children exposed to domestic violence against their mothers. National data will be presented, followed by data from the crisis centres of the Marche region. Finally partial data that has been collated from teachers and social workers on the training course will be presented.

2. Italian data on domestic violence

Reliable public data with regard to domestic violence in Italy is hard to come by as a national observatory has not yet been instituted. In 2006 the national Statistics Agency (ISTAT, 2007) completed a telephone study on physical and sexual violence with a sample of 25 000 women aged between 16 and 70. Below follow some statistics from this study.

6 million 743 thousand women experienced either physical or sexual violence in the course of their lives. In nearly all cases, these incidents were not reported to the police. 2 million 938 thousand women were victims of domestic violence alone, with 68.3% of incidents occurring in the home, while the remaining 31.7% occurring in the streets or in a car. Only 18.2% of these women considered the violence experienced a crime. As a result of repeated incidents of violence by their partners during the course of their lives, 35.% of women suffered from depression, 48.5% loss of self-esteem, 41% sleeping disorders, 14.2% difficulty in taking care of their children, 12.1% suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

This study further highlights that 11.2% of pregnant women experienced violence by their partner. During the pregnancy in 52.5% of cases, the degree of violence remained the same, decreased in 15.9%, and increased in 17.2% of cases. For 13.6% of pregnant women, the violence actually began during pregnancy. Moreover, 674 000 women who experienced repeated incidents of violence, had children. 61.4% declared that the children were present during one or more incidents with 21.6% being present often. Furthermore, in 15,7% of cases, the children were harmed during the violent episode triggered by their father.

Assuming that from this sample of women, each had only one child, 430 560 children were exposed to violence against their mothers (indirect damage), with 108 330 children being physically harmed (direct damage). The figures are alarming especially as they tend towards an underestimation of the impact of domestic violence on children, the resulting social consequences and the implications for teachers.

Given that there has been no other study made on a national level, we must look to the work of the women centres for more recent data. D.i.Re (Donne in rete contro la violenza) is a network of 60 crisis centres and women shelters stemming from the women's movement. To be part of this network the organisations must have been operational for at least 5 years. There are effectively no national guidelines or standard practices on dealing with domestic violence in Italy, so for example it possible to set up an organization or charity despite not having a strong knowledge base of the phenomenon, and with dramatic consequences for the women and children involved. The D.I.Re network provides a space for the sharing of good practice, training and campaigning on the national and international level through the WAVE network

(Women Against Violence Europe) based in Austria. In their 2011 report, collated from the member centres, 13137 women experiencing violence approached one of the 56 crisis centres (out of 60), 9162 of which (69,7%) were approaching the centre for the first time. 68% of women were Italian and 89.8% were specifically victims of domestic violence. 82.3% of perpetrators was either a partner (61.5%) or an ex partner especially following the separation (20.8%). 55.4% of centres (31/56) offer protected/non protected shelter for women and their children. In 2011, 464 women and 407 minors were housed, showing an increase from the previous year. The difficulties faced by shelters with limited resources is further compounded by recent austerity measures and the closure of shelters in 2012-2013. In fact one of the shelters that participated in the training course which will be discussed shortly, was one which was closed.

Another study that must be taken into account is the 2011 report on femicides by La Casa delle Donne di Bologna (Ioratti et al, 2011), based on collating headline news from the local and national press, as well as on-line materials. The results of this study again tend towards an underestimation of the figures as it indeed confirms that not all femicides are reported by the press and that not all deaths of women were linked to violence, for example suicides caused by years of domestic abuse, women who work in the sex trade or undocumented migrant women. Between 2005 and 2011, the press reported that 746 women had been killed, with a peak of 129 in 2011. 77% of the women victims were Italian, as were the perpetrators. 65% were killed by a partner or ex partner in the couple's house (36%) or in the woman's (33%). Moreover, 8 children also lost their lives, which again highlights how this phenomenon, or rather crime, is not just a 'woman's problem'.

If we turn now to the Marche region, there is only one report financed by the Department of Equal Opportunities (ORPS, 2011) which was collated in 2010 following the formal institution of 5 crisis centres in 2009. A total of 325 women approached a centre in 2010, 57% of which had children. Out of these 185 children, and again we are underestimating the figure, 80% were minors and 70% were either present or harmed during the violent incident. If we consider only the town of Ancona, 135 women alone approached the centre maybe also due to the fact that this specific centre, 'Associazione Donne e Giustizia' is part of the D.i.Re network and has been supporting women experiencing domestic violence for over 20 years. Moreover, from data obtained directly from the centre, it is interesting to note that in 2011, the year in which there were 129 femicides in Italy, they also experienced a dramatic increase in the women who attended the centre: 138 compared to 76 in 2008. This particular crisis centre is very active in the local area, raising awareness in community events, speaking at conferences and working with secondary schools. It is concerning to note furthermore that out of the 126 women that approached the centre in 2012, 4 were aged 17 and had come after the social workers had run a training session in just one school. This not only highlights how this phenomenon is still submerged, but how the work of the crisis centres and indeed the schools needs to change to address the needs of young people.

3. The training course

3.1 The sample

The group of participants is comprised of 35 participants, represented by towns in the south-central area of the Marche region in central Italy: Ancona, Ascoli Piceno, San Benedetto del Tronto and the Macerata area. 45.7% of the sample is represented by teachers, 54.2% by social workers. The teachers come from a small inland town and did not want to be identified. Their school was recently changed into a Comprehensive Institute, and now brings together children from nursery, primary and middle school, with an age range of 4 to 12 years. 10% of teachers on the course work in the nursery, 60% work in primary school and 30% work in middle school. The recently established school director also participated in the training session, but has not been calculated in the previous figures. With regard to the category of social workers, 57.8% comes from a total of three Municipal Crisis Centres (Centro Anti-Violenza) covering three different towns. Associazione Donne e Giustizia from Ancona, mentioned earlier in this paper, is one of these centres. The other two are managed and run by the same NGO association. The remaining 42.2% of social workers comes from a Social Cooperative called La Gemma also from Ancona. It includes a Woman's Shelter (Casa Rigugio Zeffiro) which offers shelter to women and children fleeing from domestic violence and a one stop housing project for women (Casa Itaca), whose stay can vary from one night to a year. 50% of these social workers work in the shelter, whilst 50% works in the housing project. It is important to note that all of the participants are female, apart from one male who was recently introduced in the shelter in order to offer a positive male role model to the women, but most importantly to the children. He alone represents 15% of shelter staff, 10% of social workers and 2% of our total sample.

3.2 Course structure and contents

The training course was entitled "Training course for Social Workers, Teachers and Parents dealing with pedagogical issues related to the phenomenon of domestic violence". Its aim was threefold: 1) the protection of children from every form of violence; 2) the promotion of the person and social development; 3) prevention and education for common responsibility. There were three main course objectives: 1) to highlight the problem of the indirect damage suffered by children who are directly present and witness violence in the home against their mothers; 2) to recognise the signs indicating that a child is experiencing a situation of violence; 3) to contrast the effects of the victimisation of children by introducing supportive measures. The course was designed to run in three sessions over a period of ten months, from November 2012 to September 2013, in order to allow for study time as well as the implementation of relevant actions and measures by each organisation. The first session provided new research results (theory), the second group feedback (assessment) and the third trainer feedback (new practice, knowledge and understanding). At the time of writing, one group has still not completed the second training session so mainly data related to the first session will be presented.

The course contents of the first session were derived from and presented the results of the European Project VI.C.T.I.M.S (2009-2011, JLS/2008/DAP3/AG/1157) which was funded by the Daphne III Programme (action grants 2007-2013). The countries which participated in this ground breaking project were Cyprus (University of Cyprus), Italy (University of Roma Tre), Romania (University of Oradea) and Slovakia (University of Presov). The project title was: *An indirect harmful effect of violence: victimizing the*

child and re-victimizing the woman-mother through her child's exposure to violence against herself. Sensitizing and creating awareness through research-product material, both transnational and differential according to the partner-context". In addition to each country report and various articles, this research project produced a 19 second TV spot and three B5 sized manuals for teachers, parents and social workers, each identified by a specific colour code, respectively yellow, pink and blue. The TV spot was shown during the training session and parts of the manuals were also read together with the groups. Each participant was given a copy for their professional working category as well as the parents manual, all translated into Italian. English versions of all three manuals were also given to the participants.

Following the presentation of the Daphne III research findings, the participants were divided into working groups following the Multiple Interaction Team Education methodology or MITE (Chistolini, 2006; 2008), whereby each group democratically selected a group representative. The representatives then selected a coordinator with the task of liaising with the course trainer. This method of working streamlined communication between the trainer and course participants but more importantly allowed for, as its very name suggests, a multiple interaction whereby each individual participated in the production of new knowledge which would be in turn tried, tested and perfected within the group, based on the acquired theory and a range of experiences, competencies, skills and instruments.

In their groups participants were asked to read specific parts of the manual and begin responding to a short answer questionnaire. Given time constraints, participants were given a further two weeks to meet in their groups to finish the work, study the manuals in greater depth and allow for reflection. The questionnaire had two parts, the first of which was divided into four main aspects: 1) issues arising from the research; 2) educational actions that they could promote to prevent children from reproducing violence; 3) operational objectives that they could meet within their organization; 4) the manuals for social workers, teachers and parents. Here course participants had to identify and set out their group objectives that they felt they could work toward in the months to come. The second part of the questionnaire had to be submitted a week before the second session and asked for an individual reflection and assessment from each course participant on the work completed to date.

4. Results

The initial results obtained verbally during the training session and from the written answers suggest that teachers and social workers generally have similar responses. They identified dealing with aggressive/passive behaviour of the child, social isolation, and poor scholastic performance as key issues arising from the Daphne research project. Teachers in particular voiced their 'fear of intervening in an appropriate way', 'fear of intervening and the consequent negative reactions of families', 'uncertainty of the limits within which they could work'. One primary teacher submitted a questionnaire in which she stated that they suspected 'one child may be experiencing difficulties, possibly at home'. When asked to add more details to a different part of the questionnaire, the resubmitted version had been amended, stating that there were 'no cases of domestic violence in their school'. Social workers confirmed that they 'witnessed daily the data from the Daphne research', highlighting 'symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder',

'the difficult and troubled relationship between mother and child' and 'the risk that the school's lack of awareness of domestic violence (dynamics and consequences) could result in the child being diagnosed incorrectly, for example dyslexia', 'the times of the institutions, do not coincide with those of the mother working through the violence suffered by herself and her child'.

Creating safe environments where the child is allowed to express their emotions, being a positive and trustworthy role model, promoting non-violence and cooperative learning were the educational aspects identified by the course participants which they felt they could promote to prevent children from reproducing violence. La Gemma's introduction of a male play worker in the shelter as a positive male role model was followed by the creation of a specific 'listening' area and a special team just for the children, in addition to the already existing team working with the mothers to support them with positive parenting. The teachers told how they created a new school motto 'we talk to resolve problems, not fight'. They also started to use what they called a 'secret diary or diary of the emotions', in which the children could write down all their thoughts and feelings, and the diary would then be locked in a cupboard where nobody could read it. Teachers however would access the diary and read it at the end of the week, and "address issues without the children knowing we had read it".

Being more attentive to the needs of the child, making colleagues aware and collaborating with parents were the operational objectives that teachers and social workers felt they could meet within their organisation. Social workers 'already work as part of a close team given the nature of domestic violence and the difficulties with institutions and public awareness, attitudes'. 'We share all the information we get on training courses with our colleagues'. 'Though not possible during the first consultation with women in the crisis centres, greater attention to the child and the importance of parenting was paid by the psychologist during therapy sessions'. A teacher spoke of a set time they held with a class of primary children in which they were asked to talk about any problems they were facing. 'One child disclosed their story in tears, which prompted other children, one after another, to tell their story. They were all crying. We didn't know what to do.'

All teachers and social workers found the three manuals easy to read and the information was clearly laid out. The manuals for teachers and social workers were used by each professional group and referred to continuously, particularly pages 44-49 on supportive practices. The manuals for parents were neither given to nor read together with parents. Social workers used them indirectly by making them available in their respective centres (bookshelves, coffee tables) but stated that 'women who are trying to leave violence are not in a state to read' and 'they feel their role as a mother is continuously being questioned'. Teachers on the other hand felt that 'parents would not be open to the manuals' and 'they might feel threatened or feel criticised'. Working through and together with the Parents Association had been suggested, yet the school did not choose that route.

5. Discussion

Several considerations need to be made when considering the data. The first concerns the sample size which is small, given the experimental nature of the training course, and that

one group of social workers has not yet completed the second session. During the first and second training sessions, the shelter was closed. This resulted in losing some participants for the second session as they had moved on to other employments. At the time of writing, the individual reflection from the male play worker was not available. The third and final training session is expected to run in September 2013. There is also the fact that only one school is represented compared to five organisations that have already been working daily in the field of domestic violence, for over 20 years in the case of Ancona. In this light, the answers given from the teachers should be interpreted, if not more generously, then at least with greater understanding. Both groups find a common point when it comes to the lack of effective national legislation and guidelines and when it comes to social recognition. Social workers find themselves literally fighting for existence as resources spent in welfare and the voluntary sector are becoming increasingly scarce. This impacts on reaching long term development goals and projects (whether educational, employment related or simply the running costs of an office or shelter) which are short-lived. Furthermore social workers from the crisis centres state they are at the mercy of the institutions or public officials (judges, hospitals, police) in their recognition of domestic violence rather than, for example, 'marital conflict'. This can have dire consequences of how the case of a mother and child is dealt with. In the same way, teachers are given an ever increasing load of responsibilities with an ever decreasing amount of resources. Their status or social role is not recognised despite that which is asked from them. Furthermore, as there are no guidelines from the Ministry of Education in dealing with children who experience domestic violence, apart from local legislation that is few and far between, their hands are tied and further bound by privacy laws and the risk of being sued. These factors are compounded by cultural attitudes toward the traditional concept of family, considering it close to a 'sacred institution' that must not be shaken but preserved at all costs. This in a way conflicts with the role of teachers bringing traditional culture to the younger generations whilst looking toward the future. Also, the notion that the profession of social workers destroys families is not easily eradicated. Teachers therefore feel that they must tread very carefully.

A clear difference that stands out between the answers of social workers and teachers can be summarised by two key words: openness and secrecy. The first group of professionals did not have a problem with being identified for the study or having their pictures taken. They welcomed the opportunity for having their work known and the increase of awareness of domestic violence that it might bring. Furthermore during the training sessions all participants took part in the discussions and whilst in their working groups there was mutual support between individuals and positive body language. These women deal with disclosure of horrifying events on a daily basis and continue to face life courageously. As for the teachers, it may be said that they still have to find their courage. Their words reflect fear and helplessness when faced with a phenomenon that is greater than one school alone. During the training sessions and in telephone conversations with the group coordinator, constant reassurance was required, reaffirming that their practices were not being criticised as they were all enthusiastic about their work. They were encouraged to set up a network together with different organisations yet the need for secrecy was stronger. A reason could be the geographical location of the school: in a very small mountain community, where everyone has always known everything about everybody, a community that is at times isolated during the winter months. This hold of secrecy was also reflected in the 'secret diary', questionable in its

educational and moral purposes. The message sent to children is a confusing one: it is safe to write about your feelings and problems because nobody will read them. If instead you give voice to your thoughts or feelings, the adults around you will not know how to deal with them. During the training sessions, the participants did not appear to work together cohesively between different groups. Their approach was hierarchical, based on age or role within the school. The two teachers who work specifically with children with special needs in the classroom, were not appreciated as valuable members of staff and ignored when they spoke. The groups of primary and middle school teachers worked in a circle, whilst nursery teachers, also representative of the older members of staff as well as the less formally trained, remained sitting in a line with their arms crossed. They questioned the relevance of the exercise given that the children they dealt with were younger than the Daphne research sample. They struggled, for example, to see how an objective which they themselves had set like 'being more attentive to the needs of the children' could be of benefit to all children, not just those experiencing domestic violence. However, as stated earlier, the data that this paper has presented is only partial. Furthermore, it reflects the participants' progress mid-way through a professional training course that also requires of them personal growth and challenges preconceived notions of domestic violence. It cannot be stated that these results will remain the same by the third session.

6. Conclusion

This paper introduced national data related to domestic violence as well as some of the latest data from the crisis centres of the Marche region in Italy. The initial findings of an experimental professional training course for teachers and social workers were then presented. The course aimed at increasing awareness of the damage caused to children exposed to domestic violence against their mothers. The course contents were based on the results of the European Project VI.C.T.I.M.S (2009-2011, JLS/2008/DAP3/AG/1157), funded by the Daphne III Programme. The manuals produced during the Daphne project were used during and in between the sessions. Responses of teachers and social workers in a questionnaire were generally similar when it came to its three main aspects: issues arising from the research, educational actions that they could promote to prevent children from reproducing violence, operational objectives for their organisation. Specifically, these can be identified as: dealing with aggressive/passive behaviour, social isolation, poor scholastic performance (issues); creating safe environments where the child is allowed to express their emotions, being a positive and trustworthy role model, promoting non-violence and cooperative learning (educational); being more attentive to the needs of the child, making colleagues aware and collaborating with parents (operational). Teachers repeatedly expressed their fear in making incorrect assessments, breaking up families, acting outside of the limits of their role and responsibilities despite their commitment to the child's wellbeing. Mirroring this fear is the frustration highlighted by social operators juggling between the timescales of institutions and those of woman and child elaborating their experience of violence. Social workers and teachers diverge when it comes to attitudes toward domestic violence, the first group tends toward openness whilst the second toward secrecy. It is strongly recommended that further training is necessary for adults working with children, to develop and create their full potential as citizens. It is crucial to offer children experiencing domestic violence an alternative way of being.

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