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The indirect harmful effect of violence as an unforgettable experience on the child's and woman-mother's life: a qualitative research in progress in Italy

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Title

This European project, part of the Daphne III Trans-national Projects, Acronym VI.C.T.I.M.S (VICTIMS) VI-ctimizing C-hildren T-hrough I-njuring M-otherS, is entitled: "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 trans-national and differential according to the partner-context".

In addition to the author, the Italian participants include three other professors from Università Roma Tre: Roberto Cipriani, Marina D'Amato, Matteo Villanova and the researcher Diana Pallotta.

Summary

The project aims to a) highlight the indirect harmful effect on children exposed to violence against their mothers b) identify the mother's awareness of the indirect harmful effect on her children present during the violence against herself c) collect testimonies, focus groups, interviews of women whose children were present during the violence against them d) create meaningful scenarios to use as instruments with children or descriptive, prescriptive and predictive vignettes regarding the sensitivity to and awareness of the indirect harmful effect e) produce comparative data and materials.

Introduction

Violence against women is a social problem of international proportions. Nearly every day television reports at least one case of rape, abuse, or murder of women.. We have national statistics, updated at regional and local levels. The 2009 2nd *Follow Up Report to the United Nations on the Monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescents in Italy on The Rights of the Child and Adolescents in Italy* highlights the lack of data on the effects of domestic violence on children. "In our Country the phenomenon of abuse and intra-family maltreatment with regard to minors is still underestimated; some forms of maltreatment, in particular witnessing violence and psychological maltreatment, are still today hardly taken into account and are not considered as having a harmful effect on the psycho-physical development of the minor" (Working group for the Convention on the rights of the child and adolescents (CRC), 2009, 82). According to article 19 of the Convention, the UN Committee recommends that Italy undertake research into violence, maltreatment and abuse suffered by children, especially within families and in school. The Daphne III project entrusted to Università Roma Tre aims to contribute to studies concerning the woman's awareness of the indirect harmful effect on the child exposed to violence against herself and to produce useful materials to increase social and political sensitivity of the damage caused by violence against women and children in current and future generations.

Theory and methodology

The following theories are concerned with the analysis of international (cfr. Landsman M. J., Copps Hartley C., 2001, 445–461; McGuigan W. M., Pratt C. C., 2001, 869–883) and national studies (cfr. Passuello M. G., Sgritta G.B., Longo V. 2008; Preziosi S., Bianchi M. 2009). Italian studies focus especially on the descriptive and diagnostic aspects, offering recommendations, rather than being predictive of the phenomenon. Children who have witnessed violence still constitute a field of study that has little been examined by pedagogy and there is a lack of attention given to educational and preventative issues concerning children.

In Italy national data was published in 2008 by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and by the Department of Equal Opportunities residing at the Presidency of the Council of ministers. The types of violence identified are: physical, sexual, psychological (isolation, control, economic violence, denigration, intimidation), persecutory, also referred to as *stalking*, a criminal offence since 2009.

6 million 743 thousand women, aged between 16 and 70 stated that they had been victims of *physical or sexual violence* at least once during their lifetime, that is 31,9% of the female population. 7 million 134 thousand women stated they had experienced *psychological violence* (43,2%). Stalking affected 2 million 77 thousand women, or 18,8% of women involved in separating from their partners. Among women victims of stalking more than 68% of partners made repeated attempts to talk to the woman.

Among the 690 thousand women victims of repeated violence from their partner, 62,4% declared that the children witnessed the violence and that in 15,7% of the cases, the children themselves were the direct target of their father's violence.

Research also highlights a close link between being a witness of intra-family violence as a child and being a victim or author of violence as an adult. Prior experiences of violence experienced within the family of origin increase the risk of victimization of both the woman that suffers the violence and the man that uses it. 7,9% of women aged between 16 and 70 years of age witnessed their father's violence against their mother and among these, 58,5% were victims of violence as adults, against 2,6% that never witnessed violence as a child. A similar relationship can be found with the men authors of violence. In 30% of the cases, he was a witnessed violence as a child. In this group, 34,8% were victims of violence by their fathers, 42,4 % by their mothers and 6% was not a victim of violence within the family of origin.

The study regarding children witnesses of violence refers back to the *history of violence* examined, in turn, with qualitative methodologies.

During March-July 2010 we collected 58 testimonies from the Police, legal offices, Crisis Centres, Family Advice Bureaus, Hospitals and carried out 30 interviews, using focus groups and individual interviews. Records are of Italian women victims of violence whose children were present during the incidents of maltreatment. The results are currently being elaborated.

Below are a few observations to develop further in the comparative study. There was a high level of collaboration from the women.

Results

The results pertain to the five descriptive areas:

- A – socio-demographic data
- B – aggressive behaviour of the child/children
- C – violence against the woman-mother
- D – mother and child/children dynamic
- E – child/children and school

We have presented some brief data for each area and propose some structural typologies for our evidence. Details of the interviews' phraseology and language are not included but are part of

another section of work. The analysis focuses here on grouping together the results in categories defined *a posteriori*.

A – Socio-demographic data

The sample of 30 women comes mainly from Rome (87%). They are: aged between 25 and 35 years (70%), educated to high school level (63%), employed (73%). Only one case cohabits (3%), in three cases (9%) the rape concerned the under-aged daughter. 57% only have more than one child, male children are predominant (59%). The most represented age group is 6-18 years (56%).

B - Aggressive behaviour of the son(s)/daughter(s)

The child's/children's aggressive behaviour, as noted by the mothers, is discontinuous. Some children are aggressive at home and at school, others only at home or only at school. Some children turn their aggression onto themselves, harming their own bodies, including attempts of running away from home and suicide. Others are aggressive towards other children (biting, pushing, domineering attitudes). They can turn against the mother, the father or both parents. Non-aggression is parallel to and goes hand in hand with the child's silence and indifference.

Aggression is a **relatively constant experience** in the child witness of violence and it can manifest itself against different figures, even towards the self (cutting and biting oneself, suicide attempts).

Aggression in children is often present in correspondence with episodes of witnessing violence and tends to disappear once the child is no longer exposed to those situations. Nevertheless, there does exist a state of **latent aggression** in that the child, especially the males of our sample, who witnessed violence being used against the mother can reproduce it against her himself (he throws objects at the mother).

In young children self-defence mechanisms is seen through self-aggression, aggression towards class mates, towards the mother and father, as well as other adult figures such as teachers. As the children approach the end of adolescence and become adults, they can also retaliate against the father if first assaulted by him. In one case the woman-mother interviewed noted how her son's rebellion against the father who was offending him marked a turning point of liberation and emancipation.

The experience of domestic violence influences the children's behaviour, whether male or female. When there is more than one child within the same family, a situation of **sharing suffering in silence** is created. The women reported how the children sided with either the mother or father, with a further fragmentation and a **game of taking sides** where the search for **balance** is always **unstable**.

In some cases the mother talks about the **normal aggression** of her son/daughter, referring to the child's own liveliness, the boundary between liveliness and aggression being unclear.

The phenomenon of **pre-bullying** manifests itself in nursery children who go for the younger and more vulnerable ones and they imitate the bigger and stronger ones, they carry on as smug protagonists. The phenomenon of **bullying** manifests around the age of 10: a 10 year old boy was "encircled by his class mates who bullied and shouted horrible phrases" and he asked to change school. Similar situations also occur in middle schools.

C – Violence against the woman-mother

In this area we reflect mainly on two key issues:

- *situations* that trigger violent behaviour against the woman-mother and
- what keeps the woman-mother at home despite the violence

The range of situations that set off the man's violent behaviour go from "nothing" to being envious of the woman-mother's professional success. To try and create some meaningful groupings and define some explanatory categories, we have at least 8 situations, such as:

1. nothing, stupid things, any reason, futile motives: *every day situations – every day life syndrome*
2. jealousy, envy, a phone call: *emotive situations– inferiority complex syndrome*
3. alcohol, drugs: *situations of altered psycho-physical conditions – dependence on alcoholic and psychotropic substances syndrome*
4. unemployment, illness, road accident: *objective situations – psycho—social isolation syndrome*
5. feeling of power: *situation of the tyrant father - authoritarian personality syndrome*
6. feeling of unlimited freedom, absence of responsibilities: *ethical situations and situations of role – youth culture syndrome/Peter Pan syndrome*
7. education of the family of origin, inter-generational violence in the man's family: *situations of reproducing family clichés – bio-hereditary determinism syndrome*
8. bothering the woman-mother and her children: *situations of immaturity and inability to manage the family – syndrome of infantilism.*

With regard to *what keeps* the woman-mother at home despite the violence, we have identified different factors:

- The woman-mother identifies obstacles to reporting her partner. These can be summarised as factors of an *institutional* nature. "The institutions that intervene first have a disorientating and obstructing attitude, the attitude is chauvinistic, the only route available is individual psychological therapy". When they report their partners they are discouraged by such phrases as: "Don't wash your dirty linen in public, forget about it, you don't really want to report your husband!"
- Factors of a *legal* nature, legal proceedings are complex, captious and appear to accuse the woman rather than help her.
- *Psychologists* represent the third obstacle as they talk about conflict and not violence.
- The negative experience of those that had previously reported their partners: perpetrators of violence go unpunished, after the woman has undergone exams, procedures, courts, she ends up being *socially* guilty.
- The fifth factor is of a *cultural* nature. Reporting the husband is a decision that breaks up the whole family who actually believed in this marriage. The decision to get out of the situation of domestic violence is always a tormented one and represents the failure of a life's course. The woman-mother has to face the failure of her marriage, of the cohabitation and has to admit to herself that she can't go on any further. Before reaching this point, she has to overcome what we have called "what keeps the woman-mother at home" despite the violence. The "what" has been identified as:

D – Mother child/children dynamic

Comments on this section of the interviews that we extrapolated from the first work report deal with:

- the dynamic that we have defined as "blaming game" and
- the contradictions that exist within the phenomenon of domestic violence

The laying of blame follows different trajectories: the mother blames herself for her husband's behaviour; the child blames the mother; the husband blames the mother; the children blame the father.

A *blaming game* emerges, starting with the woman-mother who is the first to consider herself

responsible for her husband's/partner's violent behaviour and tries to change herself by turning to a psychologist, in the hope of saving the relationship.

Then others are later made to feel guilty: children, husband, family, husband's mother. The behavioural scheme also foresees the male child taking on a *protective role* and the female child adopting an *accusatory role*. The perpetrator becomes a victim, thus producing the effect of *victimization*.

With regard to *contradictions*, a common contradiction of the woman-mother is her *being in love* that conceals the violence and the *refusal to separate* the children from their father. In the children, the greatest contradiction is *loving the father* despite the violence and regarding the violence against the mother as a minor harm compared to the suffering caused by separation from the father.

Another contradiction is the *inability to see the violence* from the beginning. In fact the behaviour before marriage was accepted by the woman and only later, following repeated assaults does the woman recognise the violence for what it is.

The non recognition of violence in the family of origin is a *training of tolerance* of the state of slavery set up by the man. The abused girl cultivates *defensive attitudes towards the father* and blames the mother.

An *institutional and legal contradiction* is that of the mother being forced to leave her child with the man who used violence against her. The children have *problems processing the violent behaviour* of the father and unconsciously reproduce it.

E – Child/children and school

The effects of violence in elementary and middle school children manifests in *decreased levels of concentration*, they can't see the point of school and they lose their previous engagement. Attachment to the mother increases out of fear of losing her.

The consequences at school vary over time, identified in *three phases*: 1) *acute*, violent, when domestic violence occurs; 2) *critical*, of escape, when mother and children are removed from the situation of domestic violence and taken to the crisis Centre; 3) of *stability*, of reconstruction, when mother and child find an apartment where they can settle and live without danger. When there is violence within the home, it is common for the children to re-sit subjects or repeat the entire year. There are delays and failures. When the mother goes to live in the shelter with her children, they slowly begin catching up, though this is still difficult given that life in the shelter does not provide a stable environment. In some cases women remain in danger and have to change accommodation several times. Finally in the third phase they can live in their own house. They can rebuild a more regular and stable life. The children's performance at school tends to improve.

Children that experienced violence in the home constantly show contempt and intolerance to reprimands. Whether they delve into their studies as compensation for their suffering or refuse to study because of no self-esteem, they reproduce the situation of *victor* and of *victim*.

School results and achievement suffer from the experience of domestic violence, when the child gets out from the situation of violence, results improve.

In most cases the women-mothers believe that teachers should pay more *attention* to their children's situation.

Cases of *pre-bullying* were identified in crèche and nursery school and cases of *bullying* at elementary and middle school. The mothers are generally not worried about these phenomena and do not attribute them to their children's exposure to violence. *Desiring to be the centre of attention* and *egocentrism* are phenomena identified in children that have witnessed violence. They are a *positive sign* when the child is a person that attracts friends and protects younger children and a

negative sign when the child assaults his/her friends and always wants to be the centre of attention. Emerging phenomena have been identified such as *truancy parties*, where absences are organized by middle school children, *enticement* by underage girls displayed for sexual gratification and a precocious *apprenticeship in theft* carried out by the older children to the detriment of the younger ones.

Conclusions

In the majority of cases the women are *aware of the harmful effect caused to the child* and as a consequence follow the reporting to the police, separation and leaving home. The *degree of awareness* depends on variables regarding socio-cultural and demographic status. The younger middle class women who have their own income, higher levels of education, a social life and relationships outside of the family sphere, who live in cities and close to the crisis Centres, are more conscious of violence and are more determined in reporting it. Only in a minority of cases did the women show no awareness of violence. They claimed their husband's behaviour was "normal" because "he's not well, sometimes he changes, he transforms himself, he has a double personality" and believing that "if I were stronger maybe it would not have happened", adding "these are normal things that happen to many families because it's hard living today with kids" and furthermore "I couldn't handle taking care of my children". There is the complete lack of desire to break up with the violent partner.

Awareness and normality are inversely proportional: those that are aware do not judge violence as "normal" whereas those that are *not* aware judge violence as "normal".

The women that are separated with joint custody live in a constant state of anxiety, they are afraid for their child when kept by the father. The three widows interviewed did not encounter violence directly but through the raped daughter (1), during the entire marriage without having reported the man or separated (1), during the marriage having reported the husband whilst he was still alive (1). The women that still have a relationship with their husband or partner find themselves having to come to a decision and ask everyone for help, searching for the right advice. With the older women, the experience of violence represents a past from which they have escaped, but not so for the children. They are conscious that somewhere inside their children lie the residues of this negative experience.

The damage caused to the children is permanent and *proportional to the period of exposure* to violence. We have identified the following types of indirect harmful effects on the child:

- **Psychological damage:** personality disorders diagnosed as anorexia, bulimia, fainting, malaise, panic attacks, anxiety, pulling out hair, self-harm (cutting), suicide attempts, nightmares, somnambulism, bedwetting, difficult and delayed weaning, morbid attachment to mother, problems socializing.
- **Social damage:** problems socializing at school and with class mates, followed by the inability to assert their rights to play, affection, respect among peers and adult esteem.
- **Cultural damage:** refusal to create own family, a widely diffused sentiment among children witnesses of violence out of fear of reproducing the behaviours that the mind and reason deny but that are feared to resurface despite separation from the environment of violence.
- **Moral damage:** difficulty choosing between good and evil, with representations of death desired for he who is violent against the mother: "I'll kill him, they can't do anything to me because I'm a minor and you are safe".
- **Existential damage:** feeling the lack for a father they can be proud of, the masculine figure is controversial in the mind and heart of the child witness of violence, the "dad is always the dad" seems to even justify the violence.
- **Physical damage:** mobility problems with loss of balance, the mind loses control of the body which moves in a disharmonious and disorderly fashion, in some cases the child is immobilised "he

throws himself on the floor and says that his legs hurt and that he can't walk"

Interviews were studied to create 17 illustrative but not exhaustive scenarios on the child's perception-attitude to violence. The scenes are based on what the woman-mothers said about their children's exposure to the violence against them. We recorded the children's words, their behaviour whilst faced with the violence and after, according to what was said by the mothers. Some scenarios are the mother's real story, others merge several elements present during the interview. There is a wide range of scenarios and it will be necessary to make a selection given the comparative aims of this study.

Below follow 17 scenario titles with a brief description (defining work on scenarios is still in progress).

I - Scenario of the transparent wolf: the girl shows a drawing depicting the situation of danger, she knows instinctively that the wolf is there but she can't see it.

II - Scenario of ambivalent love: the child lives through a situation of separation between the spouses and manifests feeling of love towards both parents.

III - Scenario on the game of picking sides: the children perceive the danger and cope by protecting the mother.

IV - Scenario on the attachment to the mother: the young girl, exposed to domestic violence, develops a strong attachment to the mother thus delaying weaning.

V - Scenario on bullying: the child that witnesses domestic violence becomes a victim of bullying at school.

VI - Scenario on the mother-daughter relationship: the emotional relationship is conditioned by the financial variable.

VII - Scenario on brothers and sisters: the brothers and sisters that witness domestic violence create a solidarity that resembles complicity

VIII - Scenario on sports: sports become an outlet to vent the child's aggression.

IX - Ecological/Environmental scenario: ecological/environmental behaviour of helping nature reveals the child's perception of fear

X - Scenario on friendship: domestic violence excludes the development of a rightful concept of friendship.

XI - The family model scenario: the child's fear of repeating the family model of domestic violence.

XII - Scenario on self-esteem: bulimia, a childhood disorder caused by exposure to domestic violence

XIII - Scenario on scholastic dispersion: lowering the obedience threshold of social rules and rejection of school.

XIV - Scenario on somatization: the body manifests autonomous changes not controlled by the brain.

XV - Scenario on the reproduction of gender differences: woman's tolerance of domestic violence teaches male dominance.

XVI - Scenario on children suffering: denying the child's right to play, have free time, peace and quiet in the family.

XVII - Scenario on socialization: child's exclusion-inclusion dynamics in the school environment.

Further work

Subsequent work will:

- combine testimonies and interviews evidence, focusing on the mother-child relationship and the indirect harmful effect to the child;
- define the meaningful scenarios to be used with the sample of male and female children aged between 10-11;

- report on previous and present research results having the same object of study; produce a European comparative report on the subject

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