

EMPOWERING CARE POLITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS ON EMPOWERING GIRLS LIVING IN RESIDENTIAL CARE INSTITUTIONS ACROSS THE EU

Empowering Care is a European project aiming at increasing knowledge on the prevalence and characteristics of violence and abuse against girls aged 14-18 in residential care and under the legal responsibility of public authorities in five EU Member States (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Italy and Spain). Moreover, the project also aimed at empowering young girls in residential care to protect and prevent themselves and their peers from violence.

The Empowering Care political recommendations are the result of the joint work of the partnership during the last 2 years. Within this document, the Empowering Care project and its partnership is seeking to place the issue of young girls living in residential care and their experiences of violence on both the European and national political agendas. The aim of the recommendations is to raise awareness and sensitise policy makers and civil servants on the seriousness of the violence experienced by girls placed in residential care institutions. Consequently, the recommendations also aim at urging them to deal with this insufficiently covered social problem and providing them with adequate guidelines for action.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE INTRODUCTION OF GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN CHILDREN'S (BOYS AND GIRLS) RIGHTS LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

Whereas

- A. Children are gendered human beings and girls-children have specific experiences and needs
- B. European policies addressing children's rights take a gender blind approach. Even though children's rights are considered within different European policies and programmes, they use the neutral term "children" which reinforces the invisibility of the girl-children and the particular concerns that they face with, including sex-based discrimination and stereotyping, and a higher risk of sexual and labour exploitation, trafficking of human being and violence.
- C. Within the EU, the right to protection and respect and the promotion of the principle of the child's best interests are recognised in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which gained the same legal status as the EU Treaties with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009. The Charter uses the neutral term "child" throughout with minimal reference to gender. In its point 3 the Charter refers to "his or her": 'every child shall have the right to maintain on a regular basis a personal relationship and direct contact with either his or her parents, unless is contrary to his or her interest', but there is no direct reference to girl-children.
- D. Since 2004, no legislation has been adopted at EU level affecting the rights of girl-children. However, other initiatives, actions and documents on children's rights have been developed. Yet, in most of the cases, they do not take gender perspective into account, even when they concern issues strongly connected to the rights of the girl child such as violence, sexual exploitation and child pornography or use of the internet and other communication technologies.

E. The 2006 European Strategy on the Rights of Child considers the situation of children in Europe, but it does not include a gender-sensitive perspective. Issues such as female genital mutilation, coercive sexual relations, forced marriages and HIV infections are addressed, but without paying attention to the specificity of their gender dimension.

F. In 2008, the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union analysed and developed the first ever indicators for the girl child in the EU. These indicators cover three areas: a) sexual and reproductive health looking at sex and relationship education; b) media and cultural attitudes and practices looking at body self-image; and c) educational accomplishments in mathematics and science.

G. The EC Communication on “An EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child” (2011) is one of the last documents issued by the EU on this matter. In it, the EC reinforces the idea that the promotion and the protection of the rights of the child is one of the objectives of the EU. It also states that it is now time to move up a gear on the rights of the child and to transform policy objectives into action. With this Communication the EC aims at reaffirming the strong commitment of all EU institutions and all Member States to promoting, protecting and fulfilling the right of the child in all relevant EU policies and to turn it into concrete results. The agenda focuses on a number of concrete actions, fighting against violence against children being one of them. However, once again, gender perspective is absent, a gender blind approach is used and no references to the specificities of the girl child when facing violence are taken into account.

The Empowering Care project

1. Acknowledges the need to incorporate gender analysis and gender perspective in all EU legal documents, policies, programmes and actions for the protection and promotion of children rights.
2. Calls on the European institutions to elaborate and implement specific policy initiatives and programmes to tackle the needs of girl children, specifically those victims of several types of violence and living in residential care institutions.
3. Calls on the Council of the European Union to follow up the use of the indicators for the girl child designed in 2008, under the Slovenian Presidency of the Council.
4. Calls on national governments to incorporate gender analysis and gender perspective in all legal documents, policies, programmes and action for the protection and promotion of children rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BREAK THE CIRCLE OF VIOLENCE: THE EMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS

Whereas

H. The research developed in the framework of the Empowering Care project reaffirms the results of other researches (UNICEF (2008) From invisible to indivisible, promoting and protection the right of the girls child to be free of violence; UN Secretary General (2006) Study on violence against children): the majority of girls living in institutional care have experienced different kinds of violence and abuse before entering care institutions. The experienced violence and abuse seriously damage girls' wellbeing and self-confidence.

I. In most of the cases violence had been exerted by a family member or by somebody they knew. It is precisely the fact that the perpetrator was somebody known what generated more confusion, disorientation and distress among the girls. During the episodes of violence, girls felt disoriented, lonely, sad and ashamed. Most of them did not know what to do and they did not know where to look for help.

J. All the girls, of course, wished that they had not experienced violence in their lives. However, most of them ensured that having been through such hard and serious experiences had made them stronger and able to overcome any further obstacle that they may encounter in their life. Even the emotional fragility in which most of the girls found themselves, they all had developed resilience strategies that allowed them to survive and a new life to live.

K. In parallel, traditional gender roles and patriarchal values have shown to be pervasive among girls. As stated by UNICEF, there is a link between traditional gender beliefs and future experiences of intimate violence. Violence against women is a continuum over all stages of women's live and violence against the girl child is fundamentally related to the same gender-discrimination norms and practices that cause violence against women (UNICEF (2008) From invisible to indivisible, promoting and protection the right of the girls child to be free of violence).

L. Girl minors, at a critical stage of sexual and affective development, are at greater risk of engaging in violent intimate relationships. Indeed, that is one of the main results of the research. In most of the cases, girls who participated in the Empowering Care research were involved in non-healthy intimate relationships. Relationships are considered by girls as a way to obtain love and affection, a way to overcome the lacking within the family. However, in most of the cases the relations were based on control, ownership and other toxic dynamics.

The Empowering Care project

5. Calls on national governments to develop and set up specific gender-based support services for girls in situation of violence. Moreover, they should make sure that both professionals and children themselves have the appropriate information about the services.

6. Calls on national governments to design and implement raising awareness and sensitisation campaigns against violence against boys and girls.

7. Calls for the design and the implementation of gendered specific-tailor made empowering programmes for girls living in residential care institutions. Responsibility of governments on guardianship of the girls living in residential care implies that governments must provide technical and educative support for girls. This should include gender-sensitive affective education and prevention of violence. Lack of attention in this area entails serious consequences related to insufficient protection of girls.

The programmes should aim at empowering young girls in residential care to protect and prevent themselves and their peers from violence and promote equitable sexual and affective relationships. The programmes should promote a process of development of emotional competences and personal empowerment of girls living in residential care institutions. Moreover, the programme should raise girls' awareness about their rights; rights that safeguard their safety, development and general wellbeing within an overall aim of promoting the recognition of self-authority and self-confidence to achieve their own purposes and life expectations.

8. Calls upon the care institutions to foster the training of the professionals working in them. Girl minors are under the legal responsibility of public authorities and, hence, are entitled to adequate protection. However, professionals in care institutions often have inadequate knowledge about violence and gender issues, and even bias and stereotypes against the girls. Moreover, one of the results of the project is the great interest of the professionals working in care to be more prepared to deal with the situations of the girls.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

The partnership of the project was constituted by SURT, Women's Foundation (Catalunya) as coordinated, and Tampep Association (Italy), Women's and Gender Studies, University of Oulu (Finland), Animus Association Foundation (Bulgaria) and Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (Cyprus) as partner organisations. Moreover, in Catalunya, the General Direction for the Attention to Childhood and Adolescence, Government of Catalonia and the Catalan Women's Institute participated as associated partners.

For more information please visit: www.empoweringcare.eu