

Empowering Care.
Empowering girls in residential care against violence against women



ITALIAN RESEARCH REPORT



Image by Paola, age 17

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Table of Contents

Methodological framework	4
<i>Focus areas and geography of the research</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Strategic cooperation with the social services and management of the interviews.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Planning and management of the focus groups with the girls</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Planning and management of the focus group with the social workers.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Italian national context	8
<i>Overview regarding violence against women: social aspects</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>The evolution of the legal framework</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>The critical topic of prevention and practical intervention</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Residential Care: the national and the regional systems of residential care</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Perceptions and experiences of the girls: gender roles and stereotypes</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Social and intimate relationships</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Residential care experiences: feelings, positive and negative aspects</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Violent experiences and the effects on women's lives</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>15 young life stories in summary</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>From experiences to representations of violence.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Perceptions and experiences of the professionals: gender stereotypes.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Perceptions of the professionals concerning violence.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>The professionals' situation and their principle needs, skills and difficulties.....</i>	<i>37</i>
Bibliography	39
The messages for other girls	41

Methodological framework

Focus areas and geography of the research

This study aims to improve the understanding of violence and its many manifestations, particularly among adolescents. In Italy, the level of social awareness regarding the phenomenon of violence is often limited to sensational cases in the news, while off in the shadows, everyday, women and girls are victims of violence, both with visible and not so visible signs.

As part of the comparative work between the different countries involved in the project (Spain, Finland, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Italy), this report covers the results of the research activity carried out in Italy, which was carried out in the Piedmont region between the months of April and June 2013.

The target study group of the project included girls between the ages of 14 and 18, housed in residential communities, who have been witness to at least one episode of violence in their lifetime. The communities are primarily assisting the girls through empowerment activities so that they will learn how to protect themselves, and to recognize and prevent violence as adults. These girls, and the educators who work with them, have tried to get to the bottom of the processes and dynamics that led to the violent actions of which they were victims. To do so, 15 individual interviews and two focus groups with the girls and one focus group with the educators were carried out.

Official organizations involved in the research included the office for Minors Services of the City of Turin and, at a later date, the Monviso Solidarity Consortium for Social Services, which has expertise also in the neighbouring province of Cuneo.

The public residential facilities are normally managed by specialized cooperatives, in the case of Turin, however, one community is still managed directly by the city. Although the social services that take care of the girls are concentrated in the territories of Turin, Saluzzo and Fossano, the residential facilities for minors are located in various areas of Piedmont, thus involving also other provinces. In fact, the receiving communities try to provide maximum protection for the minor by distancing the girls from the context in which the violence they underwent occurred.

Overall, the project involved 10 residential communities in Piedmont, through which we met and interviewed a total of 25 girls and 30 educators.¹ We also interviewed the Neighbourhood Watch Unit of the Municipal Police of Turin, the Prosecutors of the Juvenile Court of Saluzzo and the Juvenile Court of Turin, the Office of Foreign Minor Services of the City of Turin, the Monviso Solidarity Consortium for the Social Services of Saluzzo and Fossano, and finally the S.V.S. St. Anne Anti-Violence Centre.

To all of them, we offer our sincere gratitude.

Strategic cooperation with the social services and management of the interviews

When we took the first steps to accomplish our goal of interviewing 15 girls between the ages of 14 and 18 living in protected communities as victims of violence, we knew it would not be easy. A protective atmosphere has been built up around these young people, which tends to reject any external interference that may further disturb the progress of these girls, who have already been through such physically and psychologically traumatic experiences.

¹ We do not mention the individual names of the communities in order to protect the minors we interviewed. We also do not give the name of any single person, nor reveal the real identities of the girls, who have been given fake names for the purposes of this research.

We, therefore, asked the Office of Minor Services of the City of Turin to find us the most appropriate methods. In our first operational meeting, which involved nine educators and the head of the office, several questions, concerns and possible solutions emerged.

The critical issues were related, on the one hand, to the authorizations needed in order to interview the girls, and on the other, to the fear that our intervention could interfere in the psycho-educational progress already achieved by each girl. With respect to the issue of authorizations, in fact, both the formal and informal implications had to be taken into account.

The formal aspects relate mostly to the fact that, as legal minors, we needed to determine who could consent to an interview. For some of them, parental rights had been delegated to a guardian, and for others, to the parents themselves. In the latter case, some parents might have been against the idea that the girls would have told us information that could implicate them or that could have a bearing on the criminal or civil proceedings in progress.

The informal, yet no less delicate, aspects concerned the best way in which to involve the many professionals who work with the girls: the child neuropsychologist, the social workers, the community educators and, ultimately, the girls themselves.

And, finally, for all the interviews conducted, we must give due credit to the operators with whom we worked: the educators of the Office of Minor Services of the City of Turin and the operators of the Monviso Solidarity Consortium built up the entire network of accords and permissions. Their involvement played a crucial role, demonstrated by the fact that for each interview conducted, there were at least just as many cases of denied or refused consent.

The first essential element was to **establish methods of communication** that did not generate denial towards the project. To achieve this, we tried to involve a variety of professional figures to whom the project was explained with particular attention to the aspects of operational setbacks.

We also drew specific attention to the language, for example, using the term "interview" suggested the creation of a structured questionnaire, to which one associates the concepts of depersonalization and undifferentiated data. So we started talking about carrying out "discussions," each of which would be focused on a different area of interest:

1. The life of the girls, their family members, their interests and opinions.
2. Their current situation in the residential community.
3. The conceptual representations of violence that the girls hold and their actual experiences with violence.
4. A deeper understanding of the different aspects of violence, going beyond the physicality of violent acts, and more importantly, unearthing hidden instances of violence.
5. The point of view of the girls specifically regarding possible sexual violence, and any other physical acts of violence.
6. Any acts of self-harm.
7. Any violence towards third parties.
8. The changes produced by violence.

The second step was to **build motivation** that would encourage the involvement of the girls. It was immediately very clear that the discussions would not be possible without the consent of the girls. We also wanted the girls to view their participation in the project as protagonists, and not as subjects "under investigation". In fact, this distinction was very successful. We explained to the girls that sharing their experience, and their life stories, would help other girls who find themselves in similar situations and, more generally, create a greater awareness in their peers and in society. To highlight this goal, each discussion was concluded with an offer to send a personal message to other girls. We prepared colourful "call outs"

(the classic comic book voice bubbles) in which each girl was able to send-off her message of hope, encouragement or concern.²

Almost all of the girls started the discussions off feeling fear. Fear of being forced to say things they did not want to talk about, fear of not being able to express themselves properly, to say the wrong things. Even their postures at the beginning of the discussions were defensive (they tried to create distance, their hands, arms and legs seemed difficult to place). As the discussions continued, however, they began to show greater confidence and confidentiality.

In the discussions, we let the girls speak following the natural flow of their thoughts. We chose not to intervene with constant interruptions, but to **customize each discussion**, leading each girl along in a more organic process. The girls enjoyed this aspect because it responded in large part to their desire to talk and to not be investigated. In fact, several of the girls expressed how happy they were that our discussions were nothing like their interviews with the court.

The relationships we made with the girls were always conducted adhering to the principle of **maximum transparency**, in line with the same principle that the educators promote within the communities. We explained the project and the contents of the intended discussions to the girls, assuring them anonymity and privacy regarding what each would say. A meeting preceded each discussion in which the community educators introduced us to each girl's case and developmental program. Again, the girls were informed and, upon specific request, we explained anything they asked about. The quote of one girl is particularly significant; she said, *"It seems right that if you talk about me, I know about it. It would bother me to find out that things were said about me or that decisions were made without involving me."*

[Nicole, age 16]

The interviews were sometimes facilitated by the use of a recording device, but in several cases the girls felt embarrassed about being recorded and asked us not to use it. In addition to the fact that a transcript is very important in research work, we are convinced that the **use of the literal expressions** of the girls is a great way to improve the level of communication. It is obvious that the concepts expressed could have been edited into more complex, more appropriate, more correct verbiage, but doing so would have risked filtering out each girl's personality, and also their current state of adolescence.

For example, one of the most difficult questions asked was "What does violence mean to you?" Let's be honest, each and every one of us would have had a difficult time giving an immediate answer. In the words of the girls, we can hear the formation of their thoughts, the insecurity, the difficulty they face in speaking about this topic, their desire for confirmation.

"Umm, I don't know, violence can happen in so many ways.

It can be.... I don't know how to say it.

When someone doesn't respect you, like... I don't know.

Hitting each other doesn't fix anything.

And then... Right?"

[Anna, age 15]

In this report, we often use direct quotations from our discussions because sometimes they are funny and effective expressions, but also because we wanted to bring out the voices of the many people involved in this project, who all brought their own contributions.

Planning and management of the focus groups with the girls

Two focus groups, in which a total of 14 girls participated, were planned and successfully carried out.

² All the messages are listed in the appendix of this research.

The planning of these meetings was more streamlined in regards to the number of official authorizations required, but were nonetheless complex due to the difficulties we had in finding a time at which all participants were free to meet for at least two hours. We entered into the life of the community and into the lives of these girls, recognizing that they each have numerous, consecutive commitments that are often difficult to postpone. The girls all go to school, and many of them also attend additional professional courses, followed by internships and evening classes to complete their high school degrees. They are also engaged in dance classes, the church choir, parish activities, appointments with the psychologist, interviews with their social workers ... and at the end of the school year, with final exams. The planning of the project was, therefore, very complex and the program underwent several last minute changes. In fact, as many as four girls who would have liked to participate decided at the last moment that they could not.

We brought together **girls from different communities**, and this was an interesting experience because some of the foreign girls had the opportunity to meet other fellow-countrywomen in their same situation and to speak a bit in their mother tongues. All the girls were able to discuss how their different countries of origin function. The focus groups were designed and planned not only as **productive moments but also as moments in which to create friendships**, spaces in which there was room to get to know each other, partially also in order to overcome the embarrassment of having to speak in front of strangers.

We made two principle methodological choices:

- The first was regarding the input into the discussions, or how to break the ice and encourage the girls to talk to each other about gender roles in society and in relationships. To facilitate this, we started the discussion with a ten-minute screening of the famous animated film *Shrek III*, which is very popular among teenagers. The story involves all the major protagonists of well-known fairy tales (Captain Hook, Pinocchio, Cinderella, Snow White, etc.). Each of these characters portrays an exaggerated nuance of his or her role, particularly regarding gender stereotypes, but the collective action of the group and the union of forces create a winning strategy, and they are able to exploit the potential of each character and to transform their faults into virtues. In summary, we found it to be a positive and provocative message with which to start.

- The second choice had to do with, yet again, the idea to leave some imprint of the girls' original thoughts. We proposed that they write a small message and seal it in a bottle. Ideally, the message left in the bottle represented their hopes that someone out there might understand, might come to know something that she cannot or is not able to tell otherwise. It was a very engaging game for the girls. They asked several times if they could leave the cards blank, but in the end, thinking about it and talking it over with each other, everyone put a message in a bottle.

The cards prompted:

- Your ideal man should be... (list three adjectives)
- If I say woman, what comes to mind is...
- If I say man, what comes to mind is...
- If I say violence, what comes to mind is...

Planning and management of the focus group with the social workers

Ten female educators and one male educator participated in the focus group.

The discussion was developed around several key topics:

- The ideas they hold of their roles as teachers and educators, and their perception of adequacy or otherwise in that role;
- The problems that must be managed in relation to violence;
- Listening to the girls and the related possible stress in bringing out their hidden stories of violence;
- The necessary network of relationships required for the education in the communities of female victims of violence.

Various engagement techniques were also used with the educators in order to facilitate the surfacing of experiences: the use of metaphors to succinctly describe their experience with the girls and their beliefs on the type of contribution they are able to give.

Participation in the discussion, and commitment to the project in general, was very high. The feedback we received was positive, especially with regards to the comparison carried out between practitioners working in facilities with different target users - children up to 13 years of age or between the ages of 14 and 18 - and in different geographical areas – in big city or the smaller towns of the province.

Italian national context

Overview regarding violence against women: social aspects

That violence is a universal fact,³ which affects everyone and can affect anyone – men and women, adults and children, etc. – and that it is an evil to be cured, are two solid, unfortunate truths in modern societies. That behind these acts of violence, we still mostly see female victims and male aggressors, is another fact,⁴ an observation.

But the conviction, that at the basis of this relationship between victim and aggressor, there are profound gender inequalities, which are often based on beliefs that propose certain and distinct standards of conduct for women and men, it not a fact that is so equally and widely accepted.

Each individual forms his or her own self-perception, and adheres to values, roles and to the concepts of male and female in relation to the social and cultural environments in which he or she grows up. This means that gender role stereotypes are not static, but, rather, have a strong geographical and historical variability.

The prevailing model of relationships between the genders, until the 1980s, and particularly in Italy, was usually that the man held the position as the economic and legal head of the family, and the woman devoted herself to the care of her home and children.⁵ The gradual furthering of female education, women's progressive participation in the workforce and in fertility decisions, and the strengthening of social protection programs, within the more general context of progressing beyond the Ford production model and that of the welfare associated with it ('male breadwinner'), are the basis for the changes that have affected the representation of gender roles within the traditional society, and that have resulted in more autonomous life choices by women. Unfortunately, this process of emancipation in Italy, in addition to having been rather slow and strongly hindered by the more traditional culture, was often not accompanied by an equitable division of "typically female" duties: so while there was a major increase in the participation of women in the workforce, they still continued to be delegated the majority of the housework and childcare.⁶

In addition, the working environment has not proved to be any less influenced by gender stereotypes.⁷ Women mainly compete for less prestigious and less well paid positions geared toward those activities that continue to be regarded as more akin to the feminine nature (i.e. personal services). This not only helps to revive the traditional representations of gender roles in society, but also objectively makes women exposed to new risks, even if only by subjecting them once again to the economic dependence that generates an indisputable limitation of autonomy.

³ WHO, 2005.

⁴ EURES-ANSA, 2005.

⁵ Barbagli, Saraceno, 1997.

⁶ Saraceno, Naldini, 2011.

⁷ Pilutti et al., 1996; Saraceno, 2003; Bertolini et al., 2006; Zanatta, 2008.

Of course, the changes that have occurred do make the destinies of men and women less deterministic. The stages that once had a defined schedule (i.e. study, work, buy a house, get married, have children, the woman stays at home, etc.), and that followed each other in an established order, today are less stringent. A couple can choose to send their children to a day-care centre, entrust them to a nanny, or take turns off work to manage childcare themselves.

One can choose, if the services she requires are available locally, if she has the economic resources and the consent of her partner. But at the same time, the economic difficulties, the insecurity and the fragmentary nature of work today, together with the recent financial crisis, have all further tightened the conditions of employment, and have forced people to accept improvised or unpleasant life solutions in order to deal with the unexpected, to survive. These circumstances are exacerbated by Italian social and welfare models that continue to attach to the family, and therefore to the woman, the majority of at-home responsibilities.

Given these observations, it can be said that the progress of social values and relational structures towards a direction of greater gender balance is not automatic, even after achieving significant changes in the socio-economic context of reference. Additionally, "one of the consequences of the spread of individualism is that socially accepted conventions and norms are no longer the universally accepted way to define the forms and purposes of romantic relationships, but rather it is the unique choices and desires of individuals who decide to form a couple."⁸ This phenomenon brings with it a heightened sense of disorientation and difficulty in identifying with a male or female role.

But what is the connection between violence and gender? It has been demonstrated that the confusion and frustration that come from the loss of control of one's role in society, and one's ability to exercise it, are detonators of violence. Violence, therefore, is exercised not only as the "venting" of a manifestation of excess that has been caused by a personal imbalance, but also as a strategy to restore a context of encoded relationships in which each person has his or her own place and duties. The power of the strongest ensures, with the threat or actual manifestation of violence, that others behave according to their own values, desires and interests.⁹ For these reasons, the family, the nucleus of sharing and cohabitation, paradoxically, can become a place where the different representations of the roles can generate violent behaviour, which inside the confines of the family are often less visible and more difficult to contrast. In this manner, violence becomes a means to control and repress every attempt at emancipation, especially that of females. Violence becomes an exercise in the repression of anyone who is on the road to empowerment, and therefore, is also often directed towards children and to anyone or anything departing from tradition.

"One father beat his children on the soles of their feet, where the skin is thinner, it hurts the most, and the signs are not seen.

He was an Egyptian construction worker loved by everyone, often referred to as a very good person.

The family explained to us that his beating of the children had to do with their migration plan to return home. In fact, with the children taking on an increasingly Western lifestyle, the father was losing his authority and this would not facilitate the return to Egypt." [Neighbourhood Watch Unit of the Municipal Police of Torino]

Physical and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, emotional conditioning, threats and coercive or controlling behaviours are tools of power. Many of these tools have serious consequences, including death (there were 124 female victims in Italy in 2012). The aggressor-victim relationship is deeply rooted in gender association, in men against women. But the phenomenon of violence always takes on many new forms and subtexts that are difficult to detect and to counter.

One father read the diary of his daughter Cinzia¹⁰ and found out that she had a crush on a classmate, as well as on Brad Pitt and Scamarcio, typical among teenagers. He and his partner decided, therefore, that Cinzia should get fat

⁸ Giddens, 1995.

⁹ Elster, 2007.

¹⁰ All the names of the girls interviewed are fictional, to ensure their anonymity.

so that then the boys won't pay her any attention. Every evening, they made her eat bread, potatoes, pasta and other fatty foods. Once a week, they weighed her to check if she was gaining weight or not.

Now, in a residential community, Cinzia gained a few kilos and the educator told her: "Cinzia, we need to watch ourselves a bit, you've gained a few kilos" and Cinzia jokes: "Hah, yeah. Now someone cares. Before, I was supposed to eat bread, potatoes and fatty foods to gain weight..."

[Cinzia, age 16]

The evolution of the legal framework

Fortunately, social and cultural perseverance, together with important regulatory changes, have fostered, over time, a change in the social awareness on the issue in Italy. The level of acceptance of violent behaviour in society, the network of individuals who are able to accommodate and protect the victims, and the ability to punish abusers, have all changed.

From the legislative point of view, regarding in particular intra-family violence, a turning point came along with Law No. 151 of 1976, which reformed family law. In Italy, a little less than 40 years ago, the principle of equality between spouses was formally introduced: both partners in marriage are called to exercise equal rights and duties. This meant the end of the man as the single head of the family who, for example, had the full right to use "reasonable means for correctional and disciplinary actions" against all those who lived in the household.

This "educational" role, although asymmetrical in terms of gender, seemed, however, to respond to the Constitutional dictate that entrusts parents with the power and duty to educate their children, even with moderate means of coercion. In this regard, Italian lawmakers had been considering for a long time how to confront the problem of intervening to punish the excesses. In order to protect minors in particular, article 571 of the Italian Criminal Code entered into force in 1930 (Rocco Code) and intended to punish correctional excesses, both in terms of the intensity of force and of its repetitiveness, and also regarding the type of means used (i.e. using a seat belt for beating was punishable under this law). In order to discriminate between lawful and unlawful conduct, this article also considered the multiplicity of effects that correctional actions may cause, even evaluating suicide as a result of the abuse.

So, while in 1976 Italian family law went a step further in promoting gender equity within the family, Italian criminal law, despite having put protections in place for each member of the family, for a long time placed more attention on punishing the abuser, than safeguarding the victim. Therefore, a critical aspect that often emerged in cases during the testimony of the injured party was a request for some protective action to be taken against the violence, which in cases of family violence is a very problematic procedure. In many cases, in fact, the victim was requested to report the abuser without subsequent intervention from the officials, unless there was further news of violent actions. Furthermore, a woman who had suffered violence and who had reported her husband, was obligated to return home and live with him, without any form of protection.

Only as of 2001, Law No. 154 "Measures against intra-familial violence" introduced a provision that allowed for the removal of the victim of violence from the home, in order to ensure his or her safety. This solution, however, is disputed, because while the victim is distanced from home, the violent and subsequently guilty person continues to live in his home undisturbed. This issue was brought up often in research that catalogued the experience of children in such situations.

"The paradoxical nature of the community safe haven is that it is the victim who is sent away from her home, not the abuser, and often we are talking about this as a long-term solution.

When I meet with the girls they ask me 'why did I have to be sent away from home?'

I can't do anything but reveal my powerlessness.

There is, actually, some attempt to urge the judges to expel the father (when he is the abuser), but if the father refuses, it's a dead letter. It is a sad and humiliating situation." [Judge for the Juvenile Court of Turin]

Yet, despite the paradox, it continues to be very important for society and for the victims to have protected places, places that can take in women, mothers with their children, and underage girls and boys, away from all those situations in which danger is imminent and serious. This system of emergency response protection is not homogeneous across the Italian territory; it changes from region to region. There are regions in which, for example, no law has yet established shelters for women victims of violence. In Piedmont, the establishment of "anti-violence centres and shelters" is a recent breakthrough (Regional Law No. 16/2009).

A significant cultural change took place in Italy with the "Rape Law" of 1996 (No. 66 of February 15, 1996). Sexual violence ceased to be considered an offense against public morals and was redefined as an offense against the person. This law enshrined women's full self-determination in relation to their sexuality.

The manner in which the 1996 law provides for the prosecution of sexual offenses is an important sign of the fact that crimes of violence against women, and even more so against children, are not "individual problems," but rather they are problems that affect the whole society in which they occur. These crimes, in cases where children are involved or in cases of very severe violence (via the use of force, repetition, or the means used), become officially prosecutable, even without a lawsuit. As a result, the official possibilities of intervention have been expanded, although in practice, the public authorities still face the problem of identifying possible interventions against the abusers and rapists before the victim suffers serious injury.

Law No. 66 also outlines the different types of "sexual acts with minors" to discern cases in which minors are consenting from those in which they are forced.

Two years later, in 1998, two laws were enacted that are very important in combating the sexual exploitation and commodification of the body, particularly in the case of minors.

The first is commonly called the "Anti-Paedophilia Law" (No. 269/1998), which introduced an article about child prostitution and a second article on child pornography.

This law was revised in 2006, with the introduction of Law No. 38 entitled "Measures to combat the sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, also via the Internet." Law No. 38 was primarily designed to adapt the Italian national framework to that of the European Union's. It recognizes new forms of violence that occur, for example, via the web, and increases the law enforcement's range of action, both during the investigation and also in precautionary measures. It also toughened the punishments for those who commit sexual offenses against minors.

The second law is the Immigration Act, which introduced through its article 18 social protection for women who have been trafficked and forced into prostitution. These women are granted a six-month residence permit in Italy that can be renewed for another year. It is an innovative measure because it keeps the social recovery process separate from that of the judicial process, and thus, the victims, for the first time, are given the opportunity to complete a social and psychological recovery program, regardless of the criminal report made by the victim. The positive effects of this law have been evident, particularly in its first two years as law enforcement witnessed an increase in both the emergences of cases from the underground, and of the denouncements against criminal networks of traffickers and exploiters.

Lastly, Law No. 228 of 2003, "Measures against trafficking in persons," brought about further changes to the Criminal Code (articles 600, 601 and 602) in order to establish certain, secure, and serious penalties, against the phenomena of "new slavery" including threats, deceit and the abuse of authority.

Law No. 38 of 2009 presents another milestone in the fight against violence: it recognizes repeated persecutory acts of harassment, and threats that cause severe states of anxiety and fear in victims, so much so that they fear for their safety, or in other words, stalking, as a crime. The law lays out substantial penalties for stalkers and allows for investigative measures that are usually only granted in cases of the most serious offenses (i.e. wiretapping).

A key point that still poses great difficulty is that of dealing with the protection of victims. As previously stated, in 2001, Law No. 154 tried to reduce the risk of physical harm to those victims cohabiting with their aggressor by providing them with an external shelter. This law also toughened the sentences of the aggressors. In order to really function, however, these measures require the creation of effective safety nets outside of the victim's family. To support this need, the 2006 National Budget showed support and intolerance towards violence by establishing a National Fund Against Sexual and Gender Violence, and by announcing an intention to found a new National Observatory Against Violence. In addition, Law No. 7 of 2006, reaffirmed the prohibition of genital mutilation as it represents a "violation of fundamental rights to the personal integrity and to the health of women and girls." This law provides immigrant women with informational campaigns on the subject of female genital mutilation and promotes others training, promotion and awareness-raising activities in the Italian society.

Nearly 40 years of progress in legislation show that there has been a slow decrease in the degree of the social acceptance of violence, an increase of legislative protection, and more recently, a growth of support structures for victims. On the other hand, complicating the picture, we find an increasing variety of forms in which violence manifests itself and new social environments in which the violence occurs. Regardless, a lot remains to be done concerning the most important thing, the actual condemnation of violence, in order to bring it out into the open and to overcome it. Violence, especially domestic violence, is a submerged evil that struggles to be heard. Yet to break the chains of silence and fear, it is necessary to develop effective measures of protection and prevention.

The critical topic of prevention and practical intervention

A survey carried out in 2006 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) dramatically revealed the incidence of violence carried out against women in Italy: 6.7 million women, between the ages of 16 and 70, at some point during their lives, have been victims of physical or sexual abuse. Of these, 19% suffered physical violence, 24% sexual violence, and almost 32% both physical and sexual violence (Table 1).

In Piedmont, and more generally in northern Italy, where socio-economic development and per capita income is higher than the national average, the percentage of cases of violence is also above the national average. More than one third of the women surveyed have been victims of physical and sexual violence, and a further 20% have experienced physical violence, 24% sexual violence, and nearly 6% rape.

Table 1 – Women between the ages of 16 and 70 who have been victims of violence (%) - 2006

	Physical and sexual violence	Physical violence	Sexual violence	Rape or attempted rape
OVER THE SPAN OF THEIR LIVES				
Piedmont	33.6	18.3	26.5	5.2
Italy	31.9	18.8	23.7	4.8
WITHIN THE PAST 12 MONTHS				

Piedmont	5.3	2.6	3.6	0.4
Italy	5.4	2.7	3.5	0.3

Source: ISTAT, National Survey on Violence

Violence is mostly carried out in the home. The victims often know their attackers. Under the threat and coercion of their partners - husbands, boyfriends, friends - women are forced to have unwanted sex, are beaten, scarred and blackmailed.

The most disturbing aspect of this research is that the phenomenon of violence surveyed is much larger than that which emerges from the formal denouncements taking place. Many women suffer continuous acts of abuse and violence in secret. There is not yet sufficient social awareness on this dimension of violence.¹¹

In Italy, many institutional and so-called “third sector” organizations have invested heavily in information. They are trying to increase knowledge about the problem of violence, with the particular goal of raising awareness not only among those who have fortunately not suffered violence, but also among those who have, to help them to feel not so alone. Many associations have opened up help desks and telephone lines, to which anyone can turn to for information, to be listen to, for counselling and legal aid, and which, if necessary, can also help victims initiate the first steps in removing them from their homes if it is the location of the violence. Two of the most well known throughout the country include the *Telefono Rosa* (“Pink Telephone”) and the *Telefono Azzurro* (“Helpline”), specifically aimed at minors, which have both been operating since the 1980s with a wide network of volunteers. In 2008, the first Italian, non-governmental association of national anti-violence centres was founded (“D.i.Re.” - Women Against Violence Network). It is managed entirely by women’s associations. In 2011 alone, 13,137 women in situations of violence within and outside the family unit turned to the 56 centres for help, and for nearly 70% of them, it was their first time doing so.

Table 2– Violence suffered by women who have turned to the D.i.Re anti-violence centres network - 2011

- 54.4% psychological violence in the form of insults, denigration, threats, social control;
- 47% physical violence suffered from kicks, punches, slaps, attempted murders;
- 24% economic violence, imposition of economic restraints, control of wages and or deprivation thereof;
- 14.2% sexual violence, rape or forced sexual activities;
- 9.3% stalking;
- 1.6% induction and compulsory prostitution.

(The total does not add up to 100% because each woman might have been victim of more than one kind of case.)

Source: D.i.Re, monitoring

An important institutional response came in 2006, when the Department of Equal Opportunities launched a systemic project to tackle violence by activating a 24-hour toll-free hotline (1522) and constituting a connected national network.

¹¹ In this regard, it is very interesting to take a look at a survey carried out in Turin in 2005. The survey involved nearly 9,000 students in Turin’s middle schools and high schools. The goal was to understand how the students perceived the phenomenon of violence. The results highlight the lack of the students’ knowledge even about those cases of violence sensationalized by the media, although a good sense of what constitutes physical and sexual violence, but not of the related psychological damage. The most dramatic result was that the research revealed quite a few cases of violence among the students themselves: almost 12% had been the victims of groping, 10% of psychological violence and 3% of violence committed by adults. Mostly girls had suffered psychological violence, while the cases of maltreatment by parents were distributed equally among girls and boys.

"The network was designed principally to incorporate and spread nationwide all the anti-violence measures carried out by the networks at the local level, measures that aim to counter the phenomenon of gender violence, ensuring in the meantime, that the necessary connections are made between the central government authorities in the relevant judicial, social, health, safety and public order arenas.

The "nodes" of the National Anti-Violence Network are the network territorial areas. This means the municipalities, provinces or regions with which the Department for Equal Opportunities has signed a Memorandum of Understanding in order to promote awareness of and to fight gender-based violence. These MOUs also serve to promote the establishment or strengthening of the local networks in their efforts to counter incidents of gender-based violence and stalking, to facilitate the integration of the 1522 national hotline service with the socio-sanitary structures present within the local area, and finally, to organize public seminars on the topic of gender-based violence." [Government- Department of Equal Opportunities]

The intervention protocols developed at the local level allow for synergy between all the actors involved in the network, but the real reach of the network is realized at the local level and involves institutional organizations as well as private associations that work in the field. The action of the network ensures effective interventions, in terms of victim protection and the activation of appropriate criminal proceedings. However, at the real grassroots level, when meeting the protagonists of this network, it is clear that beyond the generally well-functioning procedures, there are many people making significant professional investments that go "beyond the procedures."

"The most important part about this work is trying to solve problems, even if the solutions aren't spelled out in our laws and regulations. You have to throw a little heart into your obstacles. And then we can come up with alternative solutions, like a protocol with the local Orthodox Church to provide support to Romanian women who are victims of violence [...] Without the network you cannot protect anyone and you do not go anywhere. But the network needs to be created, and it cannot be made up of solely Internet or telephone based contacts. It must be made out of real human relationships in order to function." [Commissioner of the Neighbourhood Watch Unit of the Municipal Police of Turin]

Although the regulatory framework in the fight against all forms of violence is very relevant, for example Law No. 38 of 2009 on stalking, cultural change and measures of prevention are key.

"The cases in which we are not able give a helping hand to the victims are those in which the victims give up and return to their abuser. It doesn't happen often, but occasionally it does. The most difficult cases are the stalking cases, because often we are dealing with 'uncertain victims': sometimes they want to file a complaint, and then sometimes they want to then withdraw the complaint. We must, even in these cases, find an accompanying social program for the victim until the judgment is made. We don't have that many regulatory instruments to help the victims, we just have a few. The Criminal Code gives us a few options, but they are resources that often have long lead times. We have the opportunity to request precautionary measures, via the removal from the home, or even precautionary custody in prison. But these are fairly long processes. If there is a stalker, we put in a request for the precautionary measures, but we must also give the stalker a signal that we're here, that his victim is not alone: and then we can go pick him up at home, identify him, take his fingerprints, take the frontal and profile photos... we have to do something. [...] I feel like I'm always playing defence. By using the criminal procedure, we are always looking back through the rear view mirror. We're always going back to look for evidence of events that have already happened. And while we're busy looking to find new evidence to prove already committed crimes, in the meantime abusers are out there committing new offenses. That's why we always need to be inventing new solutions! [Commissioner of the Neighbourhood Watch Unit of the Municipal Police of Turin]

In Italy, each region has developed its own guidelines and tools of intervention with which to combat the phenomenon of violence. In the case of the Piedmont region, where this research was carried out, in addition to Law No. 16/2009 and the anti-violence centres and shelters, which we have both already mentioned, the region has also enacted Law No. 11/2008, which establishes a solidarity fund to pay for legal aid for women victims of violence and abuse.

Residential Care: the national and the regional systems of residential care

Law No. 328 of November 8, 2000, titled "Framework law for the implementation of the integrated system of interventions and social services," states that local authorities should deal with the planning and organization of the integrated system of interventions and social services, while the regional and national government are responsible for the promotion of the active participation of citizens and of all third sector organizations, such as trade unions and various associations, in order to ensure the success of the interventions of social welfare. The key concept of the law is that it creates an integrated system of interventions and social services through policies and coordinated services for the various aspects of one's social needs. The measures to support women and children in difficulty fall within the basic level of social benefits, but the characteristics and requirements are set out not only at the national level, but also regionally and locally, and in any case, these services are limited by the scarce economic resources provided by the National Fund for Social Policy.

Therefore, in regards to the definitions and classifications of the characteristics of residential facilities for children in Italy, we are dealing with a varied landscape with nuances and approaches that change from region to region. More recently, there has been some effort to develop a national nomenclature in order to talk unambiguously about the types of services and facilities, but today the regulatory framework is still defined by the jargon of each region.

As a consequence, for the purposes of this research, we will be referring to those residential safe houses for minors solely in the Piedmont region, where, at the end of 2012, a new deliberation (Regional Law No. 25-5079 of December 18, 2012) was enacted, which in addition to redefining the types of structures provided for minors, established related structural, managerial and planning standards.

Table 3 – Types of safe houses for minors and their principle characteristics - Piedmont

- **Educational residential communities** (two different age groups: 6-10 or 11-17; maximum of 10 minors + 2 emergency cases; possibility to host 2 additional minors during the day time; but in all cases, the number of minors at any one time should not exceed 12; a community may designate its function exclusively as that of emergency reception).
- **Family homes for minors** (4 to 6 minors hosted, in addition to the minor children of the adults; the maximum total number of minors must not exceed 8).
- **Parent-child communities** (includes pregnant women, also minors and/or mothers with their children, or solely fathers with their children; they can host a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 14 guests, including children 0-3 years old).
- **Autonomous structures** host individuals with significant self-management skills, possibly acquired as a result of a having followed a program in another structure with a strong educational focus. The guests can include pregnant women, parents with children, minors of at least 16 years of age and young adults under the age of 21. These structures are not subject to any authorizations regarding their operations, but are obligated to submit a "Certified Activity Launch Report (SCIA)" to the local municipality. All autonomous structures are subject to surveillance. Differentiating by the services offered and the number of guests hosted, three types of structures can be identified:
 - **Group apartments** for adolescents and young people, or for parent/child (they welcome a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 6 guests; they must guarantee the presence of a professional educator; in the case of group apartments with teenagers/young people, if minors are present they must guarantee the presence of a night time operator).
 - **Community homes** (can host up to 12 people; there must be a fulltime manager present).
 - **Integrated retirement homes** are a particular form of reception, in hotel-like accommodations, for mothers with children, single women in situations of social vulnerability, and for young people and minors about to turn 18.
- **Therapeutic communities for minors (C.T.M.).**
- **Communities for the psychological rehabilitation of minors (C.R.P.).**
- **Socio-rehabilitative day centres (C.D.S.R.).**
- **Education centres for minors (C.E.M.) maximum 30 places.**
- **Aggregation centres for minors (C.A.M.) maximum 30 places.**

Source: Piedmont Region and the City of Turin

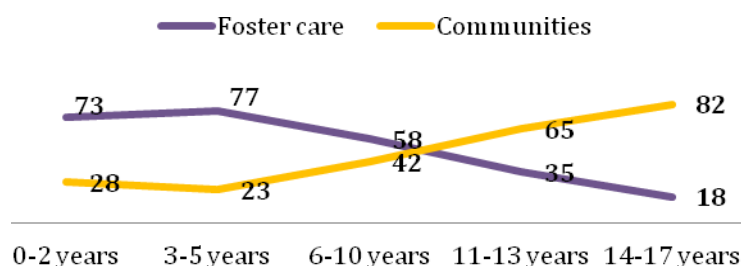
In Piedmont, in 2011, there were 227 residential facilities for minors, of which 90 were educational communities.¹² The number of children who had been removed from their families was 2,412 in total, of which 1,048 were hosted in safe houses and 1,364 in family residential services. At the national level, as of December 31, 2010, the number of minors hosted temporarily in family residential or socio-educational services and in foster care services have been 29,309.¹³ About half of these children were hosted by communities, and the other half were placed with foster families. In Piedmont, 43% of the minors removed from their homes reside in residential safe houses. This means that a large percentage of the children (57%) are in foster care, divided equally between non-related families and other relatives of the minor.

A national survey carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in 2011 on the children removed from their families revealed that one forth of the placements of minors in communities or other families occurs in an emergency situation (as defined by article 403 of the Civil Code),¹⁴ and nearly 20% of these cases involve unaccompanied foreign minors. The difficulties the social services face in having to intervene with immediacy to protect the children are, therefore, obvious. Often, in fact, the first placement is provisional and only at a later time do they try to place the children in the most suitable communities.

The national survey continuously highlights the major fragmentation that occurs in the programs of the children, who go back and forth from foster care to community homes, and vice versa, often more than once. Their stay in residential facilities is scheduled for a relatively short time (about 2 years) and, especially for younger children, the goal is to integrate them into a household setting (via foster care or adoption), but during this process problems often arise that lead to failure.

The age at which a child is brought into the system is an important factor that determines whether he or she is sent into foster care or a community. Figure 4 shows in-depth the diversification of placements based on the age of the minor. These are choices that are, to a large extent, the result of the realization that placing children over the age of 14 is often accompanied by significant difficulties both for the foster families, and for the teens themselves.

Figure 4 – Percentage of placements by age and the type of placement – Italy 2010



Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

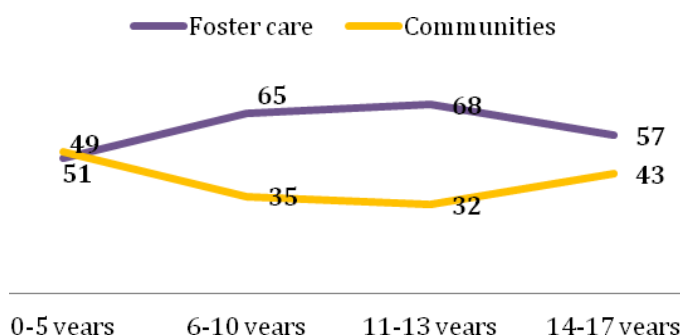
The situation at the regional level is quite different, where foster care predominates over the placement of minors in communities. Graph 5 shows a decrease in the number of foster care placements only in the 14-17 age group, offset by an increase in the number of placements in communities.

¹² Data from Dec. 31, 2011 from the Piedmont Region, Department of Health and Human Services, Health Care Properties, Social and Family Policy, Interdepartmental coordination of volunteer policies. Directorate of Social and Family Policy

¹³ Most recent data available at the national level collected by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

¹⁴ Art. 403 of the Italian Criminal Code: "When a minor is in a situation of grave danger to his/her physical or mental health, the public authorities, via their agency to safeguard childhood, will place him/her in a safe place until they can definitively provide a way to protect him/her."

Figure 5 - Percentage of placements by age and the type of placement – Piedmont 2011



Source: Piedmont Region, Directorate of Social and Family Policy – our calculations

From the perspective of gender, in Piedmont, about 55% of children removed from their families are male and 45% female. There are more boys in the age group of 0-5 years and just slightly more boys than girls in the 14-17 age group, whereas in the 6-13 age group there is a higher concentration of girls.

At least 24% of the children in the Piedmont structures are foreigners, 9% of which are unaccompanied. Clearly when it comes to foreigners, we are referring to a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, which make the placements that much more difficult, given that these children often come from cultures very different from those of their host structures.

In total, 65% of the placements in residential communities occur directly after having lived with one's parents, but, as noted at the national level, 35% of the children residing in communities have gone through periods of living with other relatives, or with foster or adoptive families, or they come from other safe houses. These minors, therefore, have lived through multiple transitions and bring with them complex experiences and relationships that the community operators must deal with on a daily basis.

In Piedmont, however, contrary to what happens at the national level, the placements of an emergency nature (as defined by article 403 of the Civil Code) account for only 7% of the children in communities. A further 2% of cases in the communities are placed via police accompaniment, while the majority (91%) of the placements are arranged by the Court.

40% of the placements are motivated by parental inability, 3% are children without a family network, 4% unaccompanied foreign minors, in addition to children suffering from psycho-physical problems (9%), neglect (8%), abuse (9%), suspicion of abuse (9%) and other typologies of problems related to health or legal problems of the parents. The number of cases of "suspected abuse" has gone from 5% in 2010 to 9% in 2011 and the Piedmont Region speculated that it may be the result of the increased attention paid by local services in reporting cases promptly.

These data show how an aware society is increasingly opposed to violence of any kind, and they reveal how much the interventions have been strengthened to protect children and to support the family.

The fact that a child has the right to live with his or her own family is expressly protected by national Law No. 149/2001 (amended with No. 184/1983), which imposes interventions in favour of the family as long as it is in the position to take care of its children. This law stipulates that the "institutionalization", or the gathering of numerous children in residential structures that were often kept in a state of neglect, should be replaced by relying on adopted families. The old structures have been transformed into community housing.

At the regional level, Law No. 37/2009, "Regulations for the support of separated and divorced parents in difficult situations," acknowledges that priority should be given to the right of children to live with their parents. To assist with this, the law offers separated parents in need psychological support, family mediation services, and assistance with housing and finances.

It is important to note that the institutional system that provides a home for the young female protagonists of this project is not a space where minors just wait the time out or pass through. The educational residential host communities are certainly places of protection, but they are also environments of life in which personalized educational processes are designed and carried out, during which the girls develop relationships with their peers and with adults, often very different to those experienced in their original families.

In particular, for girls and boys between the ages of 14 and 18, the educational project is strongly marked by the acquisition of autonomy, as we will explain later.

Research results

Perceptions and experiences of the girls: gender roles and stereotypes

When asked to comment on the roles of women and men within a couple, and whether or not there are specific activities for each gender, the girls, in chorus, claimed that a couple should share everything. They did not mention fairness or equal rights, but sharing. They clearly expressed, however, an ideal situation, because as soon as they started to discuss the actual dynamics of life as a couple, such as caring for a child, the distance between the ideal and the reality emerged.

"... In theory, both should take turns taking care of a baby. But it's almost always the woman who does it all. It's almost as if she feels like she has to, because she says, 'Poor guy, if I bother him while he's sleeping, I'm going to annoy him. I'll get up, maybe he'll do it tomorrow.' But if she always says, 'He'll do it tomorrow, he'll do it tomorrow,' it will always be her turn... And by habit, she gets up and always does it herself."

[Focus group]

The girls reject the stereotypical gender disparities that put women in the home caring for the children and men as the breadwinners. They believe that a woman should have a job, maybe part-time, and her own personal income.

They see a job as a responsibility made up of different elements that give one personal satisfaction, as well as economic benefit. The fact that there are still many women who do not work, does not change their beliefs, and they even said with some pity "poor things." Thus, they display a compassion for those women, as if none of them were privileged, and not one of the girls, for example, imagined that maybe these women enjoyed a state of economic well being thanks to their husbands' positions.

Of course, the autonomy-oriented program that girls are completing in the community puts an emphasis precisely on the values of individuality and self-determination.

In the discussions, we introduced a series of commonplace phrases to debate.

They all fully agreed with the statements "a woman can live alone" and "a woman should know how to say NO," even when, or perhaps as a result of, in their life stories they might of had mothers who were systematically beaten, but who did not want to leave the home for fear of being alone.

"I've thought about it... it's a bad situation. Sure it's great as long as you're in love, but when you fight, if you don't have a job, you're forced to stay with the man. Even if a man beats his wife, she might not be able to ask for help because she's afraid she'll no longer have anyone to support her."

"I say that they can let themselves be supported as long as they can, then when they separate, that's their problem, they should have thought about that before. Better alone than in bad company."

[Focus Group]

The words that they associate with a woman are:

"Passion, sensitivity, complexity, trustworthy, intelligent, responsible for taking care of a family, someone who's courageous, studious, strong, a person who sometimes isn't respected, my mother, my family."

And with a man, they associate:

"Being useless, tries to be superior to women, a person that's sometimes a jerk, trustworthy person, responsible, loyal, intelligent, hard working, complimentary, love, my brother, my ex."

This game of associations underlined how much the girls were not fixated on stereotypical representations, but rather were very divided among emotional (i.e. sensitive, passionate), cognitive (intelligent) and social (i.e. responsible, hard working) characteristics. In other research conducted with minors, "courage" is often associated as a more masculine than feminine feature, while our girls, on the other hand, attributed it to women. It is also interesting to note their association of women or men with a real person in their life, or as an aspiration like "man – love."

For the most part, even though the girls have seen the differences between the social roles of men and women, they do not seem to want to abandon clichés or preconceived ideas. The most evident example is their continuous use of *"it depends."* During a discussion, one girl will express an idea, and another girl will follow by underlining that *"it depends on the situation"* or *"it depends on the man: there are nice ones and there are jerks"* or *"it depends, if you teach him"* (referring to the case that a woman can teach a man how to change a diaper).

So the statement "a woman is more sensitive than a man" divides the girls, because, well, "it depends."

The girls, however, seem to be very convinced that raising children should be a shared responsibility. The experience that many of the girls shared, growing up in single-parent homes, because one parent was not present or was sick, weighed heavily on this lively discussion.

In general, we can say that the views expressed by the girls are similar to those reported by other teenagers. A survey carried out in the Veneto region among teenagers,¹⁵ in fact, highlighted the same ambivalences between an idealized vision of the relationship between genders and the reality. Additionally, this survey indicated that girls tend to view the roles as more equal than boys do.

A further observation, specific to our girls, is that most of them come from families where they themselves have had to play the role of "mother" by taking care of siblings, in place of the parents. They, therefore, acquired this aspect of care and considered it normal, and do not question it. At the same time, however, they are confused about roles, but not necessarily those related to gender:

"I was a mother to my sister, I don't even know what it means to be a sister. But now that I live in the community, they're asking me to come back to be a sister..."

[Illenia, age 16]

The girls refuse to accept restrictions on the way they dress or put on makeup, although when confronted with the phrase "If you dress in a certain way, certain things can happen to you..." they are divided between those who integrally refuse any limitations, who are strong idealists: *"a man can dress however he wants and he's never attacked,"* and between those who are more cautious and agree with the phrase.

"My boyfriend can't tell me how to put on make up, or with who I can hang out with... Because I'm with my guy friends and he's with his girl friends. I don't tell him he can't hang out with other girls. There should be mutual trust. I always tell him that if there's no trust, there's no use in continuing our relationship.

But then there are those times, when you're so in love, you'd do anything...

Yeah, I know... Like I was in the beginning. But sometimes I still dress how he wants, and I don't put on that much make up.

Then I put things straight. I told him, listen up, we better find some common ground, because I don't want to be controlled."

[Erica, age 16]

Again, in this last sentence, we can see the distance between the ideal and the real situation. Ideally, no kind of restriction is acceptable, but sometimes it is nice to do a favour for those you love. Put this way, it is hard to object, because the underlying principle is that of freedom of choice, a principle the girls say they do not want to ever give up.

Another characteristic element of the girls' stories is the search for balanced dialogue that does not involve abuse of either gender. This is summarized well by the observation of one girl who said: *"I don't agree with the phrase women have to 'stand their ground'¹⁶ with men. This makes it sound like the*

¹⁵ CREL, Violence against women. What do young people think about it?, Veneto Region, 2001.

¹⁶ This example discourse makes more sense in the original language. In Italian, the original phrase was *"tener testa all'uomo,"* which literally translates to "keeping the head of the man."

woman's in charge. I'd be better to say that if she woman wants to, she can stand her ground." Everyone, furthermore, disagreed with "whoever brings home the money has the right to be in charge."

Social and intimate relationships

Many of the girls who took part in the research have experienced failed emotional relationships, sometimes violent and accompanied by serious, psychiatric health issues.

It is, therefore, very interesting to see how they view the situations that they have experienced, and how they view their potential future married lives.

"I want to have a family, get married, have a baby, a boy.

Q: What kind of mother will you be?

A: On a psychological level, you're bound to become the mother of your children in the same way that your mother was with you. It scares me. I'm afraid of becoming like my parents and I'll try to do everything so that that doesn't happen.

I will never beat my son, a few pats on his bottom are okay, but I don't think it's necessary.

I don't want to be dependent on anyone, let myself get kicked out of the house, the situation must be mine: shared, but not dependent."

[Illenia, age 16]

Some of the girls have a boyfriend, whom they have also introduced the community, but apart from a couple of them who are experiencing intense and troubled histories, the others have a more cautious and disenchanted approach. They do not exclude the possibility that in their future there may be a family, but for the moment, they are struggling to trust in relationships.

"I have a boyfriend now, but I don't trust him that much. After what I went through with her father (referring to her 2 year old daughter)... I don't trust anyone. Let's say that, for now, I have a boyfriend to pass the time. If he calls me, I'll call him back. If he treats me well, I'll treat him well. If he treats me bad, well, I finish it. I can't trust him. I can't trust anyone."

[Laura, age 18]

One of the major concerns regarding the girls' experiences is that they are easily reproducible in the relationships that they have, or will have, with adults and with their boyfriends, a typical vicious victim-abuser cycle. But the voices of the girls, however, did not reveal any sign of weakness in this regard. They even declare that they are aware of the risk.

"I had a boyfriend that treated me bad too. I was really in love with him. After 7 months, he started really treated me bad, and I started crying, and in the end... we broke up... even though I didn't want to. But I couldn't keep holed up inside feeling bad, not going out..."

He never beat me, but he was always really mean when he answered me when I said something or when I wanted to do something and he didn't... It was better to leave him than suffer, because he was going to treat me bad for the rest of my life."

[Elisa, age 17]

Like many teenagers, many of them have ideas about the life of a couple that are not based on marriage. A couple's relationship must be based on trust and mutual understanding. An essential element of success for the couple is fidelity. It is very interesting to understand both the concepts of fidelity and trust because a lot of the girls have ideas that are very distant from the traditional meanings of the terms.

First of all, the girls declare a certain disenchantment with regard to love affairs. Initially there is love and passion, and then "normality," people get bored and move on to try someone else. In their stories, it is almost always the man who gets bored and goes out looking for a new relationship outside of the marriage. At this point, one solution is to separate, another is to confide in each other and talk about it. If there is

trust in the couple, they would prefer to know from their partner about the fling rather than from someone else, and then *"you can always give someone a second chance."*

An idea of fidelity emerges, not centred on exclusive possession in the way one dedicates one's self to a person, in particular, from the sexual point of view, but on the "keeping the faith" in an emotional connection and in a shared project.

This ideal of theirs is placed on the horizon of a long path; in fact, their immediate plans are full of other things that they still need to accomplish.

The girls are young adolescents who are experiencing rapid transformations from the physical, cognitive, psychological, emotional and relational points of view. The development of the different areas is not synchronized, and therefore, it gives the impression that a few of them are "more or less mature" than the others.

"My classmates live in their little dream world where prince charming is just waiting for them.

Maybe we're all thinking about prince charming, but not so much so that we're immobile, just sitting around waiting for him to arrive."

[Focus Group]

Thus, for some of the girls, relationships with their peers are conflicting, even if it seems like they are on the same level; for others, their peers are too immature and instigate confrontation with adults.

There are a few girls who have an irrepressible physicality who, especially outside the community, on the street, feel threatened and insecure and do not know how to behave.

Their stay in the community provides them with more space than the average household to work out conflicting relationship issues and to strengthen their self-confidence. This is especially important because the "gap" needing to be bridged, regarding the situations from which they come, is profound. Many of the girls, when they first arrived in the community, were exceedingly insecure. They tried not to expose themselves; they didn't speak. When confronted with even the tiniest of conflicts, they tended to escape. They were incapable of saying 'no.' Some of the girls were not able to deal with situations in which the others were joking around; they perceived them as threatening, and thus, reacted disproportionately. It is coming from these conditions, that the girls have had to rebuild their views on relationships and to re-assign meaning to many aspects of their lives.

Overall, the girls seem to have a positive view of gender roles and of social and emotional relationships. One might have expected that with their experiences of violence, maltreatment and family hardship, they might have expressed more negative feelings, or they might have been more likely to generalize people into broad categories by thinking, for example, that all men are the same. Instead, among these girls, who all have stories very different from one another, we gradually came to see that the experience of violence has not dulled their ideals. They have shown a great capacity for psychological endurance, although in many circumstances, they still struggle to take a position and situate themselves properly. But all this did not happen by accident.

If these girls had not been put in "specific places" in which they could learn to manage themselves, to increase their autonomy, and to "put themselves to the test," it is not a given that they would now be able to express the same positive imagery. Speaking of "specific places," we not only want to make reference to the community structures, but also more generally to all the other service providers and networks surrounding the girls.

Residential care experiences: feelings, positive and negative aspects

The experience in the community has had a different significance for each girl, sometimes very contrary to one another.

There are some girls that have spent a great deal of their lives passing from one community to another, who have also often had failed foster care experiences. For them, the community is the most reassuring place where they feel good, it is home. But it has not always been this way. They talk about how when they were little children, they did not understand why they had to be far away from their mothers. They remember wanting to show their opposition by crying and screaming, especially in front of the social workers.

"I've been here for a year. Before that, I spent 6 years in another community, 1 year in another house, and 1 year in a parent-child community, since I was 7 years old.

I'm used to it, in fact, a few times they tried to put me in foster care, but I just couldn't do it. By now I'm used to it here. I'm comfortable.

I tried three different foster families, but I couldn't do it. Being in a family, I don't know what it is... maybe I could handle 2-3 days, but living with them, I just can't."

[Franca, age 16]

For other girls, the community was the first calm place they encountered after the nightmare of prostitution, beatings and confinement. For them, the community has been the assurance, first of all, of salvation, of life, and then secondly, of physical rest. They were tired because they lived in a constant state of alert and tension, in addition to being forced to work many hours each day. They often had an initial attitude of hyper-adjustment, wanting to build up a climate free of conflict around them, but after a while they move with greater confidence. Even though they like the community, they complain about the restrictions of the rules; they would like to have greater freedom. For the older girls, the possibility to move from the community to a protected apartment is an important transition.

Some girls, who have spent less time in the community, are more impatient, not only in regards to the community, but to their situation in general. They say they had no choice, so they view the community experience as a last resort, and they are often restless and distressed.

"Two years ago, in September of 2011, my father went to self-report the situation in our house.

The police took him into custody and told him that he could not enter our house again. They told him that they would take care of his children.

So that's how this life full of social workers began. It's a circle that once you enter you can't escape from; you're marked for life. We've already been marked thanks to the violence we suffered, the psychological beating for all that we've been through – because in the end 'our violences' were psychological and hands, hands always raised up – so you're already marked, and then you get in front of a judge, in my criminal case, and you understand that you, by law, are marked as having lived in a community, you were abused, violated. You, by law, are this, and in the future, you will still be this."

[Illenia, age 16]

The relationships that these girls have with the educators are generally not confrontational; one can even say that they are good. The girls participate in the life of the community. They have created good relationships with some other members, and they continue to meet up with friends outside of the community. But it is obvious, however, that they are forced to live in a situation they never wanted. Some were even separated from their siblings, to whom they were very connected.

The community is also a place of rules, mostly rules dictated by the organization to establish a tranquil coexistence (housework shifts, curfews for entry and exit). There are also more restrictive rules, i.e. the use of mobile phones is prohibited. There are rules that the girls do not like, but, however, they do understand their significance (i.e. setting a curfew for the evening re-entry); while there are other rules that they

consider to be a real violation, an injustice (i.e. not being able to use cell phones). There have been episodes of girls escaping from the community, sometimes motivated by their inability to adapt to these rules imposed by the community. Most times, however, the girls eventually return to the community to visit their mother, father or boyfriend. Severing these ties is always difficult to accept, even when the parent in question is the cause of the problems they are facing.

One aspect the girls have particularly emphasised is the social judgment that comes along with the fact that they live in a community. Their classmates and friends, often curious, ask what it is like to live in a community, *“they ask me if they feed us.”* Or they think of a community as a correctional facility, *“you live in a community because you did something...”* The girls have the impression that in many cases, their peers hang out with them only out of pity, and their teachers have strange attitudes towards them, often not compassionate and sometimes quite accusatory.

It is obvious that there is not a lot of social awareness about what communities are, due also to the fact that many people have an antiquated idea linked to the now extinct orphanage-like communities and associate them with “residential institutes for derelict children.”

Many communities are trying to overcome this social block by allowing the friends of the girls free access to the structures at different times of the day, or by arranging a party, an effort very much appreciated by the girls.

Also, in a few of the communities, groups of volunteers have formed and these volunteers often participate in the life of the community by bringing around their families and children, maybe on Sunday or on holidays, or they come to the communities themselves for dinner or to watch TV. This is not a very diffused phenomenon because the involvement of volunteers requires a lot of effort in training and monitoring. Between the volunteers and the girls, complex dynamics are created that are sometimes not so easy to manage, and so they require constant supervision.

We met with girls both in female-only and in mixed communities and in neither case did gender-related conflicts come up in regards to cohabitation. There were more problems reported about sharing spaces between, for example, one girl who was neat and tidy and the other was not, or about theft, or about someone who does not complete their assigned tasks. Such issues are the cause of conflict between the children. For the most part, they are punished with reductions in their weekly allowances, but the punishment often does not definitively resolve the problem. The girls try to seek “justice” regarding the many aspects of everyday life, and they are very critical of the consequences that generate punishments that affect not only the person who committed the misconduct, but also everyone else – i.e. when a girl escapes, the permission to go out is limited for everyone for a certain period.

“Here in the community, it’s super difficult. There’s no freedom. Sometimes I feel like I can’t handle it anymore, and then some days I feel happy. But life shouldn’t be like this, one good day, one bad day.

Here I like everything, more or less, but not always...

When they steal something from you, it’s serious, really serious!”

[Serena, age 18]

We are sharing these dialogues to highlight the complexity and the diversity of issues that affect the communities. The important choices made about the educational programs for these girls, who have lived through violence, are daily mixed up with the small and large issues of cohabitation, and with bureaucratic and organizational issues as well. As Elisa says: *“living in a community really helps you to grow up....”*

We would like to make a final observation on the age of the girls and on the context of the communities in which they have been placed. The girls, ages 15-16, who live in communities together with younger children, complained frequently about their situation. They find the environment too restrictive in regards

to the rules, but also inadequate for their needs. During the focus groups, girls from different communities came together and compared their different situations and had a very animated discussion. We will not, of course, enter into the merits of the choices made for any individual placement, but we have understood, from the interviews conducted, that it is not always possible to place every minor in the most appropriate structure, sometimes, for example, due to limited open spaces.

We would also like to bring forward this last cultural aspect that can interfere with a good placement in the community:

"Sometimes we think that the communities outside the city confines offer a better sense of security to the girls, but that's not the case.

The Romanian girls, who in Romania lived in the countryside, associate living outside the city as safe, while the Nigerian girls, on the other hand, are afraid of the dark, of the forest, and feel better in the city. They prefer to be near the large city market, even if that means risking running into their "enemies," they still feel more protected. [Educator]

Violent experiences and the effects on women's lives

We only met with 15 girls. Their 15 stories, however, include such a diversity of situations, such a range of the different forms of violence, that they significantly contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon. It is difficult to identify the individual instances of violence (maltreatment, neglect, abuse, physical, psychological or witnessed violence) among the interwoven events of their stories. But perhaps it is not even that useful to carry out such an analytical exercise; it is more interesting to look at the processes and the dynamics that lead to the *escalation* of violence.

For some girls, the path to violence started in backgrounds of poverty, in distant countries. They were not necessarily living in violent environments from which they needed to escape, but more simply were stuck in poor families with numerous children, in which their future prospects did not look so bright. It is in such an environment of dissatisfaction that the lure of attractive job proposals in Italy can take hold. There is no one forbidding them to leave, sometimes the families are even against the idea, but a silent consent develops that feeds unknown hopes that push the girls to leave.

"My sister came back from Italy, and since in my country there were no possibilities of finding a job or studying, she told me 'I found you a job in Italy' and I, not knowing what kind of work awaited me, said yes. I was so happy; finally I would have a job! But, what I had to do was not what I expected."

[Paola, age 17]

The first instances of violence in these situations occur during the travel to Italy, in particular for victims of human trafficking. The cruellest journey is that in which they have to cross the desert. The disorientation and the desert discourage escape and when anyone resists, the traffickers just have to show them the remains of the others who tried to escape.

"We had just arrived in Niger and I saw many foreigners, whites, blacks all sitting down.

I asked, 'Where have you brought me? Why are we here?'

We were a group of 10 and they told me 'these people are going to Italy with you.'

'I want to go home.'

'No, you can't turn back now.'

They told me that the most difficult part was exiting my country, and that when I arrived in Italy I would be very lucky. I cried and all the others consoled me, they took me by the hand.

'We know you're the youngest, but you can't go back. You see those things?'

They were... human bones."

[Serena, age 18]

The psychological stress felt by this girl was very strong, at least as strong as her hope initially, but the girl who told us this infernal story also told us that many times she wished for death. She could not sleep, she remained awake at night, she could not eat, she could not think.

Her arrival in Italy was not any less painful, and at that point, all her hopes disappeared.

Not understanding Italian and not having any money are two very good reasons these victims remain connected to their abusers. Add to this the direct threat of being beaten, or actual blows, and other indirect threats to one's family members back home. Serena was forced to undergo a double voodoo ritual; Paola was told by her sister's boyfriend that they would hurt her mother. In both cases, the girls were given the blame for any bad or good that might happen.

Serena and Paola shared a similar fate of prostitution; both were victims of a racket, of criminals dedicated to the trafficking of young girls. But in Paola's case, the prostitution was forced upon her by her sister, a person one would expect to show some affection towards her, to protect her. We are certainly not going to debate whether or not it is worse to be a victim of a stranger or of a relative, but it is important to note that not just one kind of perpetrator exists. Often in prostitution trafficking, victims become the abusers of other victims. The scheme feeds off this perverse mechanism by which the "social climbing" goes from being in an abused state to becoming a collaborator who facilitates the trafficking, and then maybe, an organizer of the trafficking. It seems like that is what happened to Paola's sister.

The girls, during the discussions, often repeated that now they are able to distinguish with one glance between who they can trust and who they cannot. But when Paola's story is told they remain speechless.

Not all the stories that begin in contexts of poverty end in trafficking and prostitution. There are girls in Italy who live with their parents, very violent parents. In our cases, they are families with one biological parent present plus a partner. An important aspect of this dynamic is that these non-parent adults consider the entrance of these girls into their homes as an intrusion.

The rage directed towards the girls comes not only from the legitimate parent, but also from this estranged figure that displays hostility from the first encounter. Problems with schoolwork seem to be the main reason that sets off punishments, at times very violent (whipping with a belt), other times more psychologically mortifying in nature (i.e. made to kneel with one's hands held up for a few minutes), and other times targeting one's basic needs (i.e. withholding food).

Strategies of "behaviour correction" also affect Italian girls who have a parent with a foreign partner. In these cases of violence, the punitive aspect seems to prevail, to restrain any idea of the girls' emancipation, reinforcing the family hierarchy, above all the paternal authority. The choice of punishment, to achieve full submission, is decisive. One must use punishments that humiliate, that wear down one's will and one's physical strength to fight back. The girls who were subjected to this kind of violence still exceedingly fear that they will disappoint their parents.

The logic of denigration and subjugation affects not only the parent-child relationship, but also that between partners,¹⁷ as in the case of Mara.

Initially her boyfriend put into play seductive, caring behaviours; but as soon as she remained alone with him, in a far away country, the dynamics of enslavement kicked in: he demanded sex, isolated and watched her constantly, and insulted and vilified her for every little thing.

Responsible for these violent behaviours is not mere anger, or an uncontrollable impulse due to excessive frustration or stress, but rather a need to affirm power. Perhaps it is the lack of power that one feels when migrating, and the loss of a secure social role as a result of that.

¹⁷ Piagione, 2005.

While different forms of violence recur throughout the stories of our girls, we have also seen many different ways in which this violence is initiated. One of these is the presence of a mental disorder or of strong states of depression.

This type of ignition to violence is truly terrible because while it can be explicitly manifested, it is not socially acceptable. We will show this directly through the story of one of the girls (age 16), because in her words we can really capture the nuances of the problem.

"I have a depressed mother. It's been 13 years already that she's been depressed. She psychologically abused my father, because she was always grilling him with questions, she snapped continuously at him. Then, because of her depression, she started to close herself up at home and not go out any more, she would stay in bed all day. We, my two siblings and I, would eat circled around a pot on the bed. It was so ridiculous that I never was able to explain how we got to that point.

So many times, I asked myself, why do we have to eat in the bed even on Sunday, can't we eat at the table in the living room? So we tried to set the table, but then our mother said that she didn't feel good and we all went back to the bed.

Who knows why it happened, I don't know. It's one of those questions that no one can answer; neither my mother nor I have any answers.

Then my father got tired of tolerating this violence from my mother, and he raised his fists to her. In the end, the situation was really bleak.

I tried to put myself in my father's shoes and tried to think, since I was there, 'This woman is my wife, she's in bed all day, she doesn't do anything and as soon as I get home she looks at me and ask about money, the kids, etc.' Like, wait a minute, there are two of us and both of us should be doing things.

My father didn't have the strength to look her in the eyes and say 'get off your butt and go do something yourself.'

I think he, on the one hand, had some compassion for my mother, because he knew she was sick, but on the other hand, he was annoyed with her because she threw all their responsibilities on him. And my mother was wearing us down.

I feel bad, I feel bad for my mother and father, but neither one of them had the strength to take control of the situation and make something good come out of it.

And the thing that hurts the most, that I found out about 6 months ago because I had a meeting with my parents and the educators, was that when I asked them 'When did the problems begin?' I heard them tell me it was when I was 6 months old, and I'm the oldest sister.

Three years after I was born, my first sister passed away in the eighth month of pregnancy. I never met her, but I still consider her my sister. Three years later, my little brother was born, and then after another three years a little sister.

I say, if the problems started when I was 6 months old, why did they have another three kids? My father said it was an 'act of love,' because a life is an act of love (even though many lives are born out of violence and hurt). My mother told me, 'No, your father raped me in all four pregnancies.'

Wow, us three, in the end, what are we? We're violence. In her point of view, we're a product of violence, we're not people. Hearing something like that from my mother, even if I know she's sick and has all the problems in the world, wasn't nice at all."

[Illenia, age 16]

Another girl, Franca, also tells us about her depressed mother and schizophrenic father. She also saw her father beat her mother. She was also beaten, but by her jealous brother with psychiatric problems. In her case, in addition to the emotional and physical deprivation, she had to deal with her brother's abuse and attempted abuse by her father.

All these girls manage to find words to justify their mothers and fathers. Their stories of violence are very long. The affection of a mother and father were withheld from these girls and they feel confused. Even in the everyday life of the community, one can perceive this lack of affection, which they fill with affectionate behaviour themselves, demanding hugs from the educators, or outside the communities, by attaching on to older role models, from whom they manage to obtain affection and respect.

In summary, we have seen situations in which, typically, violence has generated more violence. A father abuses his children, and in turn, the children abuse their children. So, the father, the uncle, and the grandfather are all complicit in abusing the "women of the family," and wives are silent accomplices in this male complacency. In such a closed system, the inner family dynamics represent the larger social context in which some of the practices are considered normal. The older sister of Erica denied this degeneration, but was not met with approval. Erica does not say anything about her story, instead she tells us about a family to which she turns to for support and advice. But in the end, when we ask her:

"Do you want to tell me something about yourself that you consider important, in relation to this project on violence?"

'What I tell everyone is to not take abuse from anyone and don't let... your parents, your grandparents, or your uncles touch you...

Don't let yourself be used, and tell someone right away if something happens.

If something serious happens, then go say something right away. That's the best thing to do.

Even if you're afraid, there's a lot of people that say something and they get help rather than stay in a house where bad things happen."

[Erica, age 16]

During our discussions, all I could do was admire the courage that many of the girls displayed in personally reporting their situations. We are talking about very young girls who tried to put an end to violence. In some cases, criminal cases were opened, tried and resulted in fairly heavy sentences. During the proceedings their behaviour was questioned; the defence lawyers certainly did not depict them as victims, but not one of them backed down.

One of the major regrets that the girls, who had been liberated from prostitution, or from an abusive boyfriend or father, had was that they did not react sooner. They believe they were more influenced by economic and organizational factors; they never questioned the fact that they were deceived, although they sometimes felt guilty about having been naïve.

This differs from the cases in which the abuse happened inside a family, when the social services were already following one of the parents. The removal from the home generally happened when the girls were very young, and for a long time they experienced ambivalence in their love for the violent parent and hatred for the social services that "saved" them from the violence.

The clients or adults that fell in love with the girls, who many times accompanied the girls in their requests for help, or the authority figures in schools who become close to the girls, who have displayed in all cases to be extremely receptive and active, have both played a very important role in helping the girls escape from their situations of violence.

There is significant evidence that children and adolescents who experience abuse later develop psychological (anxiety, eating disorders, etc.) and physical (in the worst cases, fatal injuries) mental health crises.

Serena, for example, complained for a long time about backaches and many other pains. Cinzia had a fungus growing on her entire body. Paola could not sleep. Anna's legs were marked by the scars of a belt.

While there seems to be no doubt, therefore, that the onset of many of these disorders is the result of psychological abuse, neglect, or of physical and sexual violence, little is known and said about the social consequences, like the deprivation of personal power and the auto-destruction of social ties, that this violence produces.¹⁸

On the one hand, the experience of violence has a direct, immediate impact on the health of the girls. On the other, the consequences generate an even more traumatic experience via the big, practical changes in

¹⁸ Herman Lewis, 2005.

their lives (changing homes, schools, friends, etc.), which further compromise an unencumbered participation in all those experiences that bring about autonomy and the creation of one's personality and a healthy psycho-physical equilibrium. In this regard, we can look at the vast amount of literature that demonstrates the negative impact that damaging socialization experiences as small children have on the health of adults, often through chain reaction and cumulative progression mechanisms, which connect negative experiences in the family, school and peer groups with difficulties in the workplace, and with struggles of autonomy as adults¹⁹.

In passing through these stages, the girls lose their orientation every time, which undermines their sense of confidence, not only in others, but also in themselves.

It is, therefore, clear that the communities that welcome and host these girls have a determinant role: in the communities, the girls have to give themselves that second chance to relive all those 'formative' social experiences that will help them to become autonomous, and, as much as possible, psychologically stable.

The girls' great emotional compass, however, continues to be their families. It is incredible to witness how much they still have the need and desire to rebuild relationships with their parents.

At first, right after the reporting of the case or the placement in the community, they are angry and they refuse any kind of contact with their parents. Then, little by little, they seek out reconciliation: they are willing to forgive, but they want their father or sister or whomever to admit their guilt and to apologize for what happened.

Cinzia explained it well when she said:

"I'm angry with my father, but I don't hate him, I can't hate him.

I wrote him a letter to tell him that I still love him.

I want him to understand why I reported him; I did it because I wasn't okay.

It's never too late to change, if you want to change.

Q: How will you know if your father's changed or not?

A: When I meet up with him, I will know right away. First of all, from the tone of voice he'll have, and how he says hello to me. If he asks me how I am, what I'm doing, etc.... or if he tells me 'look what you did.'"

Then there's a long silence between us. Cinzia's eyes fill with years because while she hopes that her father has changed, she has no guarantee.

[Cinzia, age 16]

15 young life stories in summary

- Mara, age 16, lived in a small town in Eastern Europe with two younger sisters and her father. Her mother passed away four years ago in a car accident. Mara fell in love with an ordinary boy from her town, who, 15 days after they met, asked her to move to Italy with him. It took little to convince her. Her father tried to stop her, but without success. She was very determined, and very attracted to the possibility of having a job, money, and life as a couple.

Her delusion ended as soon as she arrived in Italy because she became the private "possession" of her boyfriend. She lived trapped in their apartment, watched over at all times, was belittled, threatened, beaten and forced to have sex.

She waited for the first possible moment of distraction and escaped. She did not understand any Italian, or know where she was, but she very luckily managed to find rescue thanks to a woman she met in a supermarket and a priest...

Mara reported her case; she rebelled against her jailer. During the proceedings, her family received several threats, but she was firmly convinced that her ex-boyfriend must pay.

At the end of June, Mara went home to her father's house.

¹⁹ The Marmot Review, 2010.

"I wanted to go home before, at the end of May, but I talked with my father and the social worker and they told me that it was better that I stayed, that I finish everything, especially because a foreign middle school diploma might help me. So I said yes, okay..."

Mainly because before I never really listened to my father. He would say something, and I would say 'yeah, yeah, okay' and then I did whatever I wanted to. Now, I thought, at least one time I should listen, maybe it's better.

Yes, before I thought that whatever I wanted was best, but now, after having found myself in the middle of so many problems, I see that he was right. I understand that he's always right because I went through these things. Anyways, parents are always right, I'm sure."

- Laura, age 18, African. She will not say how she arrived in Italy; she prefers instead to highlight how fortunate she is because in Italy she did not have to be a prostitute. Her survival, however, was linked to a young, fellow countryman, illegally living in Italy who supported himself by an undefined commercial traffic. She was always with him, dependent on him, travelling around Italy. But when her daughter Lia was born, she found herself alone.

"Q: What will your daughter be when she grows up?

A: It depends. I would like her to become an artist, or a doctor. Only if she wants, though. I can't force her to be either of these things.

I want her become famous, because of what happened between her father and I. That way he'll see her and say 'If I had only known, I wouldn't have done what I did,'

Yes, I think about getting back at him."

Her daughter is a lively two year-old toddler, born with a medical condition that requires constant monitoring. If well attended to and kept away from harsh climatic conditions, the child should run no risk and can have a normal life. For Laura, accepting the diagnosis of her child has not been easy. In her culture, it holds a lot of stigma and is kept a secret.

Laura has never been an abusive mother, but it is difficult for her to understand the real needs of a small child. She shows great impatience towards the limitations of her situation.

- Paola, age 17. She came from Eastern Europe looking for a better quality of life and opportunities, which her sister, who had been living in Italy already for years, had shown her. This was a mere delusion, which vanished quickly on the sidewalks of the new country, client after client, day and night.

"At the time, many policemen would stop and ask for my documents. On my ID it's hard to make out my date of birth. I just told them I was 18 and they didn't say anything.

Some just asked for my documents, but others grinned and winked at me...

Seeing the police scared me. Instead of taking me in, telling me to come with them, they winked... and I lost all hope."

Her sister and her sister's boyfriend, with whom she lived, threatened her, beat her and made her work for them. She never had any money; they took it all as soon as she earned it.

It was a client, with whom she fell in love, who finally accompanied her to the police station. He brought her to the same police officers that had winked at her. They were amazed; they had had no idea of her real situation.

Paola reported her sister and her boyfriend. At first, her mother reacted very aggressively towards her because she had sent her sister to prison. After the social services stepped in, the situation cleared up a bit. It seems incredible, in any case, that her mother had not seen what was going on. She had even stayed for a brief period in the house of her daughters; Paola said it was the only time they did not send her to work.

- Serena, age 18. She remembers her incredible journey across the desert: *"It lasted such a long time. So long, but I don't know how long."* She wanted to go back, but it was not possible and so she continued on in the

hope of finding better things in Italy. When she arrived, ironically on December 25th, the streets became her place of work as well. At that point, she had to work to pay off her debts: 30 thousand Euro for the trip, and then more for the rent of where she slept, rent for her street corner, money to buy clothes, food... probably for Serena, the cost of food was the least of her worries:

"On Facebook, I have a picture and my friend told me that I looked so much older, that I was pretty and so skinny.

I told her I was studying.

She asked me 'When you study, you get thin like that?'

Yeah, I'm on a diet. That's what I told everyone back home.

She told me 'Beautiful!'

I wanted to tell her everything. But she wouldn't have understood.

If they haven't been here, they don't know and they don't see. No one knows."

Serena was very precise with keeping her accounts. She had a notebook in which she wrote her expenses, earnings, and her remaining debt daily. After two years of prostitution, when she had calculated that she had already given back 25 thousand Euro, she went to her *maman* and said, 'Enough.' She had finished paying off her debt.

Now no voodoo rite could hurt her.

She never reported her exploiters to the police, but she allowed a client to help her, who protected and hosted her for a short time. Serena was a minor, but no one knew this because they had always made her say she was an adult. Only when she applied for a residence permit did she discover that according to Italian law, as a minor, she was automatically eligible for protection and assistance; she had always thought the opposite.

- Elisa, age 17, was removed from an orphanage in Africa where she grew up, and in which she is suspected to have been sexually abused. She came to Italy in a humanitarian mission. At 11 years of age, suffering from leukemia and hepatitis, she was dying. In Italy, she recovered and beat the cancer. But the trauma caused by her uprooting was so strong that it made her forget her native language entirely. Her Italian accent even has a slight Piedmont inflection.

"My brother called me and told me he's doing well. He wants to come to Italy too, but he's with my grandmother and we can't just leave her alone there. I have many relatives, but I'm closest with my grandmother, so I just can't... By now she's 50 years old and I don't want to move her to another county."

There were two possible placements: one with a mediator from her country, and another with the person who brought her to Italy from the orphanage. Two theoretical opportunities to have a family, but she continues to live in a community.

The stories that Elisa tells of her country, of her "adopted mother" (the person who brought her to Italy), and of her future possibilities are fantasies, they have no pragmatism. She is passionate about cooking and is studying so that she can open her own restaurant because her adopted mother told her that when she turns 18 she will help her to open a restaurant in her home country. We asked her, therefore, if she is willing to leave Italy and she said that she has no intention of doing so, she will just go to Africa in the summer.

- Cinzia, age 16, was living with her maternal grandparents, while her mother was away from the home for work and her father had immigrated to Italy. Her maternal grandparents, at one point, had left her with her paternal grandparents, then her mother came back, but only to say that she was moving to Spain with her new boyfriend and Cinzia's little brother. Cinzia was supposed to join her father in Italy. So that is what she did, but her arrival was not as welcoming as she would have liked. Her father's girlfriend abused her, she told her "you're dead to me," and her father abused her as well. In addition to the beatings, and having to

move around the house like a shadow so that she would not bother anyone, she was forced to consume a diet consisting only of carbohydrates and fats so that she would be less attractive to her classmates. When the father and his girlfriend started planning to abandon her so that they could move away, Cinzia feared being abandoned yet again and asked for help at school.

"I was hoping that my father would understand that by beating me he would lose me. When he yelled at me and I panicked and cried that made him even angrier. I knew I should have calmed myself down, but I couldn't. Hitting is for babies. I said we should talk about it, and my father was the first to say let's talk about it, but it always ended bad."

- Anna, age 15. She would have rather stayed in Africa with her mother and sister, but her father, already in Italy for more than twenty years, sure that his wife was cheating on him, took his two daughters, ages 6 and 9, and brought them with him. Anna, however, had trouble with school and for her father was unacceptable. He graduated from university in Italy while working. Punishment, therefore, was a daily affair. Beatings, belt whipping, and withholding food. When the social services intervened the two little girls were decidedly malnourished.

"You can trust a person if they're close to you and you know you can trust them because you've known them for so long. No, no, no, not necessarily! In general, you cannot trust most people. You can confide in your diary..."

Anna's physical development is much more advanced than that of her cognitive and relational maturity and this has created many problems for her. She is afraid of men on the street, and to stand at the bus stop. She has received compliments and catcalls that scared her.

- Denise, age 18. She arrived in Italy when she was ten years old with her twin sister and her older brother who is mentally challenged. Her mother and grandmother, who had already been living in Italy several years, completed their project of reunification by first sending for the three children and then later their father. The reunited couple had a fourth child, to whom Denise is very attached. When Denise's father arrived, however, the beatings, constant scolding, and shame began. Her twin was hospitalized for anorexia and then went to live in a community. At this point, social services knew of the family, but no one imagined the situation Denise was in, and another two years passed before she asked her sister in the community for help.

"My parents suffered so much because my sister was in a community. Then when I went they didn't talk to us anymore, for two months. Then my father (who is closer to me) started communicating with us again, but not my mother."

- Carla, age 18. She has been living in a community since she was 7 years old. Her mother is attended to by psychiatric services and her father has never been present in her life. She has an older sister in a psychiatric community and a younger sister who was adopted abroad. At first, Carla went to live with an aunt, but that ended poorly. Carla says that this experience conditioned her next two foster care experiences. When she was still living with her mother, a neighbour might have abused her. Carla does not talk about it; it is something that emerged later and that she just somewhat refers to.

"When you know the person that's abusing you, it's worse because it's a person you trust. You don't expect that people you know would do those things to you."

- Nadia, age 15. She has been in the community for just a few months, upon her mother's request for help. Nadia's father had never lived with her and has problems with drug addiction. Her mother remarried a North African. After this second marriage, four children were born to whom Nadia is very attached. The entire family practices Islam. Nadia has witnessed her mother being abused and she has had to take care of her siblings and deal with the indifference of her acquired father. Two events deteriorated the situation in Nadia's family: Nadia ran away from home to find her biological father whom she hoped would help her, but

he was unable to take care of the situation; and Nadia's new boyfriend. Nadia's mother had been planning on bringing her to her new husband's home country to find her a Muslim husband. She thought this would have strengthened the family. Nadia, in the meantime, fell in love with a boy from Eastern Europe, which was completely unacceptable to her mother and she asked the social services for help. In a certain sense, Nadia's mother was worried that she would make the same errors she had made, that she would get pregnant at 16 years old and be stuck with a violent partner. She tried to avoid the worst by giving her strict rules and limitations that made Nadia suffer even more.

Nadia told us that she was sure about not wanting to repeat her mother's mistakes, but it was evident from her stories how in love and submissive she is with her boyfriend.

"I want to get married and have 4 children, at least 1 girl.

I want to be a good mother, not a friend, but a good mother.

I'm also thinking about moving to Albania in the future.

My boyfriend came back saying that Albania is great, that his mother already has everything ready there for him to come back. His uncle has a restaurant. His father is a construction worker there and they're well paid. Then there's the garden.

There's money, a house, and work. I would work in the uncle's restaurant."

- Nicole, age 16. Born in Italy to an African mother and an absent father. Nicole is very attached to her older brother, born from the mother's second and already finished marriage. The father gained custody of her stepbrother. The police removed Nicole from her home after her mother had beaten her. The mother was already being followed by social services and it seemed like she just could not manage to control her anger nor change her lifestyle (in the past she was a prostitute and they suspect she still is today).

Nicole's story has many missing pieces. The educators are paying particular attention to the risk of prostitution Nicole might face. She also has a boyfriend who seems to be violent at times, but she denies this.

"Here they say that he is too disagreeable, and I know what that means, because I've been disagreeable myself in situations where I have to be, if not, forget it.

They say that sometimes he goes around insulting people, but that's obviously because they said something to him first. They hate him because of the colour of his skin."

- Barbara, age 16. She was living with her older sister and her father. Her mother passed away, but no one knew, not even her classmates at school. Her father is a dedicated gambler. With his bets, he lost all of their possessions, including their house, and he started abusing the older sister to try and get money from her, and the young sister so that she would pressure her older sister. The climate in the family was very tense, so much so that the older sister went to the social services for help. In the meantime, however, the father was arrested for having threatened a colleague at work. Barbara was placed in the community a month and a half ago and has built up a defensive wall of silence around her.

"No, I'm not going to say anything about myself.

If you have to see situations, not of physical violence, but problematic situations, it upsets you a little.

I'm trying to get out of here. It's not that I don't like it, but it depends on your personality. Everyone adapts in a different way and I'm not exactly the type of person that can stay in this kind of situation. So, we'll see."

- Ilenia, age 16. Ilenia's mother, the victim of very severe depression, is very aggressive towards her father, who cannot handle her continuous psychological mood swings and so beats his wife. Ilenia and her siblings, therefore, witnessed the violence between their parents, and at the same time, were also victims of physical violence doled out by their mother, who beat them for any little reason. Both Ilenia and her father tried to ask the social services for help, but what they got was even more painful for Ilenia.

"I don't have a family anymore. My siblings are going to be separated in two other families. I see a completely destroyed family.

My grandfather doesn't eat anymore; my uncle has been in the hospital several times since we've been placed in communities.

It's a chain reaction that never ends.

I always say, from the prison that was our house, we've transitioned to another prison, not the actual structure, but in a conceptual way: we came from having certain restrictions, abuses and violence at home, to now having a whole new set of rules that aren't made to help us, but are made by the law. The law doesn't care whether you feel okay or not, it doesn't try to meet you half way.

I don't say these things to alarm, but to be realistic."

Ilenia currently has a relationship with a much older man and, therefore, has to fight much opposition. There are no mechanisms that can prohibit her from continuing this relationship, but the judge and the social services have tried to examine this rapport to understand its true nature. This makes Ilenia even more furious. She feels judged, and she wants to be understood.

- Franca, age 16. The first time she was placed in a community she was 7 years old. Her father is schizophrenic and her mother is severely depressed. Franca was born prematurely with a twin, but only she survived after spending months in the hospital. As soon as she arrived home, she was the object of violence of her brother 4 years older than her. He teased her, stole her food, and physically abused her. Her mother, subject to the violent rage of her husband, was unable to fight the violence of her son to whom she was deeply attached. Franca told us about how her father also tried to abuse her. She tells us that, for her, being in the community is more normal than having a mother and father. Her plan is to go far away from Italy, because everything here reminds her of her past. She attached great importance in letting us know that she was a strong girl and that she did not want to be dragged down by her past.

"I still see my mother sometimes, but it's hard for me to call her mom. I'm used to calling the educators by their names. Sometimes I force myself to call her mom, because I know that she would feel bad. For a mother to be called their first name by her child, because calling her mom is too hard, I think it's an awful thing.

My mom is a very fragile person: she's already lost one daughter, my twin, and she hasn't seen my brother for seven years straight... when I was little I knew she was suffering and so I tried to understand her.

One time I called her Martina and she really felt bad. From then on I thought: better to stay on her good side, better to think more about her than me. Because, in any case, I owe her my life, she made me, so...

Even if I don't know her that well, your mom is always your mom.

Q: Are you less fragile than she is?

A: Yes. I don't get discouraged by every little thing. I was born after six and a half months and when I was little I fought to live, so now why should I need to get depressed? If I lived, there's a reason why. I must continue."

- Erica, age 16. She lived with her parents and 4 siblings in an apartment near her grandfather and aunts and uncles. It was an extended family circle with perverse relationship dynamics, until Erica's older sister reported the abuses she was suffering from her father and grandfather. The eavesdropping carried out by the police revealed a tremendous situation, and confirmed the abuses also Erica was suffering, which she has never discussed. Neither during the legal proceedings, nor in the community discussions has she ever verified or denied the claims made by her sister or the findings of the investigation. Behind this silence, Erica is not hiding in an alternate or imaginary world; she seems to be very practical, lucid, present and determined. Even her psychologists do not seem worried about her silence, rather they can imagine the pain that Erica must have suffered and continues to suffer in absolute silence.

"My older sister is 25 years old.

She was always the favourite in our house, just like my brother because he was the only boy, and so when my father wasn't home he was the boss.

But she was the oldest, always in first place. Every time... she still thinks she's in first place, even though she's not.

I always told her: you're the same as everyone else, just like the rest of us, just because you're the first doesn't mean you're the best.

With my sister, the less I talk with her, the better. She only makes me angry."

From experiences to representations of violence

All the girls openly declare themselves to be against violence. Even when discussing whether it is okay or not to give a small child a spanking on the bottom, they are very critical. They maintain that dialogue, explanations, and confrontation are very important. They hope that their futures will include discussions free of insults in which hands and voices are not raised.

Certainly, the representations they have of violence are very complex because their stories are equally complex.

When we asked them what violence means to them, they highlighted the psychological aspects of coercion and put even more emphasis on being treated badly.

"...You can say it's physical, meaning that someone puts their hands on you, but it's also something that just affects your feelings, with just words a person can be violent. Violent! Violent!"

"Violence hurts, it's anything that hurts. Insulting is a form of violence because it hurts. At least to me, I don't know about other people. Insults really hurt."

"When you go through certain things. Being abused, that is, hit, or being made to do something you don't want to do. Even words can hurt. It hurts to be hit, to be scolded, to be yelled at."

"When someone feels indignant, oppressed."

"...A person that is violated by force."

Several cultural aspects weigh in many of the descriptions. For the Nigerian girls in particular, physical violence is not considered as grave as insults. In fact, they add that when someone is really angry, it is better to slap the other person than to use words, because words are not forgotten.

In light of this research, it does not seem to make much sense to give considerable importance to distinguishing the various types of violence, because the overlap is too strong, and because the significance attributed to different types changes from culture to culture and depends on the different situations in each relationship.

Violence, therefore, emerges as a complex and multi-problematic phenomenon, to be looked at with multidisciplinary and comprehensive attention. It seems that violence tends to become more chronic, rather than spontaneously resolve itself. Any action taken, therefore, must be appropriate and timely. Any delay exposes a minor to the danger of suffering further violence.

One element to take note of is the relationship between emotional relationships and violence. In the instances of violence and minors, the most problematic trait is the vicious cycle of violence in and of itself, together with the fact of having suffered this violence at the hands of the people who were important figures in their lives. This is very destabilizing, even more so if the minor's experience is limited solely to violent situations, or if the victim tends to be isolated.

Perceptions and experiences of the professionals: gender stereotypes

Taking a closer look at the professional situation we observe through this research, we find a typical example of unequal gender distribution. In Italy, the majority of social workers and educators are female, and the socio-educational communities are primarily filled with female educators. The stereotype's root cause starts in the universities and in the professional choices of the male and female students.

That said, however, the presence on the staff of both genders is an enriching experience for the children of the community and for the operators themselves. On the other hand, we must admit that, in general, all

elements that carry certain specific cultural assets (i.e. multiculturalism) are enriching and considering only the diversity of gender would be a weakness.

If we enter into the merits of the stories of violence that girls have lived, however, the gender issue takes on a different perspective. The experiences from which the girls come from are characterized by gender, particularly when the violence occurred within the family: a violent or abusive father, a depressed and nagging mother... These girls have been denied important emotional references, but more importantly, have been given negative impressions of certain roles. For example the mother – the woman – she is a depressed person; the father – the man – hits with force, etc. The risk is that they make false generalizations, that women are depressed and that men are abusive.

The choice of the operators involved in the research to compose mixed groups, signifies that they actively chose to provide the girls with the chance to see alternate behaviours to those they had previously witnessed. This choice is consistent with the role that the educators are asked to play in the communities for adolescents, as was revealed during the focus group in which male and female educators of different Piedmont communities participated.

According to these operators, the educator must represent the idea of stability; he or she must be a constant in the lives of these girls who arrive scared and confused. They are teenagers and they need an adult authority figure, like their parents should have been. The educators are not substitutes for the parents, but are surrogates of the educational, emotional and support functions that the parents are not offering. They are very close to the girls, they offer their affection and sometimes, when needed, they are more severe and offer guidance.

In our opinion, however, one must avoid falling into the trap of thinking that a female educator can be the bearer solely of feminine values and that a male educator solely masculine values. It would be like saying that a single woman cannot raise a child because there is no father figure. This, in fact, makes the job of the educators in communities even more challenging. They have to be mindful not only of the 'direct' models visible in their behaviour, but also of the general way in which the issue of gender roles is discussed and proposed in a filtered way in all the behavioural, conceptual, and relational aspects of the community.

Hence, everyday the educators build personalized, not standardized, relationships with girls, in response also to their requests. Often the girls end up establishing a relationship of trust with a certain educator, and this happens irrespective of gender.

One problem that has emerged, however, concerns the degree of self-awareness the educators have. Being a man, as was someone's abusive father, can be difficult; it is as if the gender becomes unforgivably linked to the cause of the violence, and therefore also to the problem that placed the girls in the community. Managing these types of mechanisms is part of the educators' profession.

Perceptions of the professionals concerning violence

On the issue of violence, the attention of the educators is focused on the role that the community can play in helping the girls to better cope with the impact. Hosting minors with experiences of violence, as revealed in the focus group, requires a lot of professionalism because the stories of the girls profoundly impact all those who interact with them.

In the communities, the girls share a lot of their life stories, and they are allowed to do so in the manner and timeframe that they consider best. According to the educators, a good educator has to be a good listener, but they must not substitute other professions, like that of the psychologists, who have different relationships with the girls.

The essence of the experience in a community is that it offers the girls a place of protection and growth that promotes autonomy – *"in the community we work on the present and the future."* It is necessary to avoid excessively contaminating this place with what happened in the past. The community, nevertheless,

offers each girl the chance to explore other areas, to work with other professional figures on her past, her story and her trauma. In fact, there are various professionals that collaborate on the program of each girl. For the girls who have feelings of ambiguity and mistrust that arise from the violence experienced, knowing that these inter-professional connections are structured around each of their programs is important. It is important to discuss the meaning of the program with them, to set reachable goals, and eventually to possibly redesign indicators along the way.

Everything that happens upon their placement in the community must be emphatically characterized by transparency and clarity.

This program of protection and empowerment, nevertheless, does not exclude the necessity to arrive, when possible and appropriate, to the formal reporting of who carried out the violence. So the community also takes care of accompanying the girls in the path that brings them to the decision to report.

The role of protection that the community plays is not to put them in a protective bubble, but rather to help make them aware and to encourage them to make clear choices, even when this means reporting.

Clearly there is respect for the individual and her mental and physical equilibrium, but the best exercise in self-determination is that of pursuing a coherent path towards the condemnation of violence.

The professionals' situation and their principle needs, skills and difficulties

As the focus group showed, the educators are required to work simultaneously on a variety of fronts: with the girls, with the staff of the community and with various external stakeholders. The more able they are at building a network of entities that cooperate with them, the better the opportunities are that they are able to offer to the girls.

The main instruments that they dispose of are precisely the various intersections of this network. Some relationships are more formalized and institutional (social services, neuropsychiatry, etc.), and others are based on more informal rapports (companies for internships, parishes, etc.).

Sometimes, the cooperation is less than optimal and the function of various subjects in the network is tarnished by anachronistic professional pettiness, which, for example, has resulted in some psychologists refusing to disclose the content of their sessions with the girls to the educators, hiding behind the shield of patient-physician privilege.

Equally out-dated is the prevalence of hierarchical relationships between the various professionals working on the same program for the girls who have been raped. Traditionally, the neuropsychologist sits at the top of the pyramid, followed by the social services, and the educators sit at the bottom. This demands extra effort from the educators in mediating with the other professionals.

In addition, the clarity and firmness of the strategy that the community intends to take with the girls is even more important. For example, if a community has adopted rules that allow the girls the freedom to go in and out as they please, the community might have to continually refuse to host a girl, who for reasons defined by the court, cannot go out. Her presence, in fact, would make it difficult to manage the common rules. Preserving the founding principles of the educational program that the community proposes, however, in the current situation in which we see a drastic reduction in the funding of the welfare system, means running a risk: a community that does not have enough users could be closed and merged with another.

The complexity of this professional role means requirements of important investments in training, which should include listening, counselling, mediation, problem management, and intercultural communication techniques, in addition to preparation focused on the theme of violence. There are few continuing education opportunities for the educators, both because of their cost and the required time commitment.

These skills are important because the educators must work with groups of girls and with families, and they must be able to manage group dynamics and to network.



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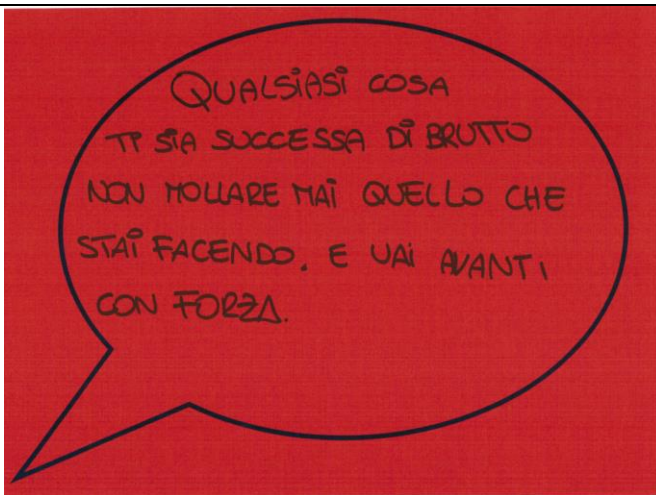
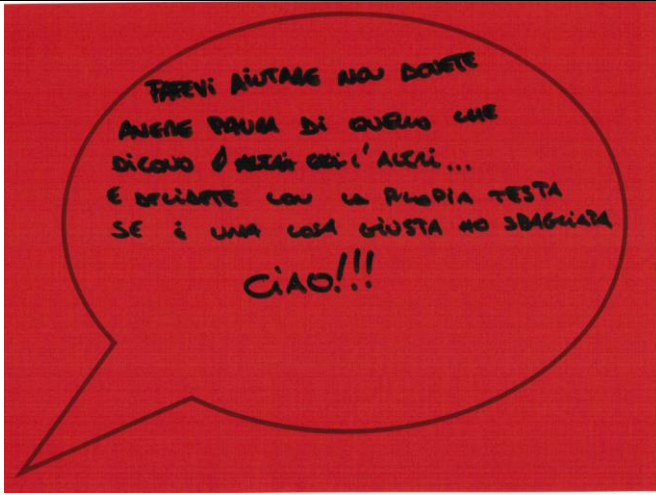
In additional to the theoretical training, it is important that all of the professionals have the chance to experience and to put into practice what they have learned, through guided and monitored positions in the workplace.

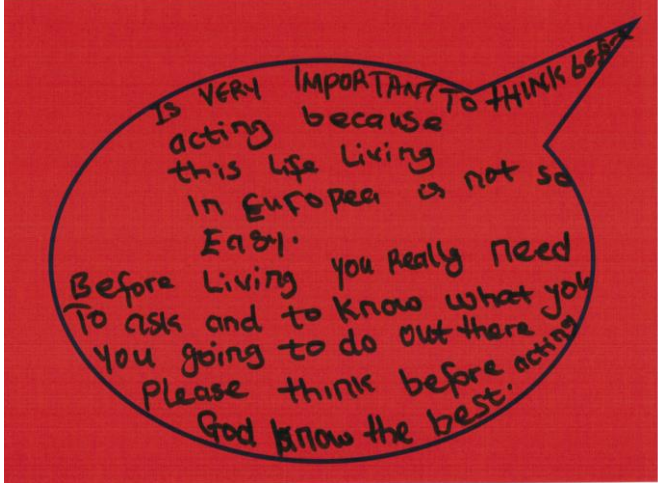
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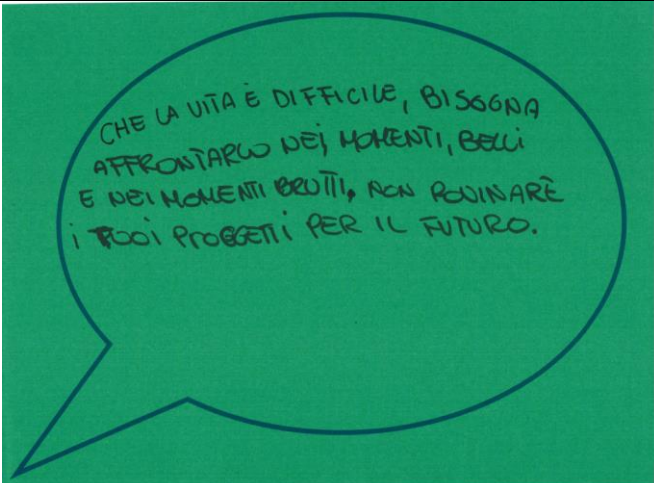
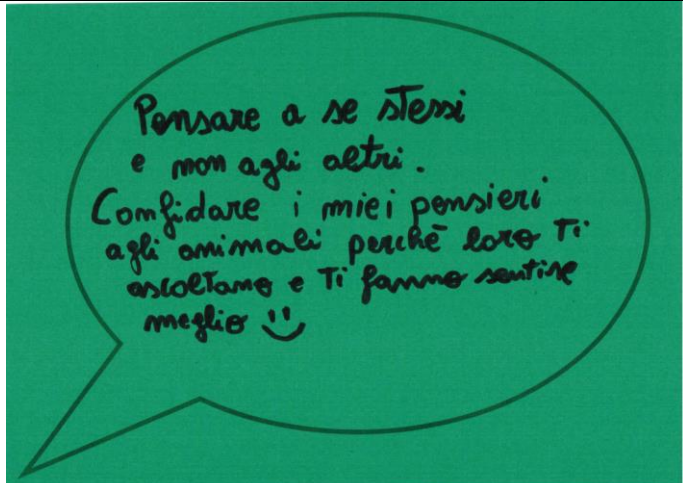
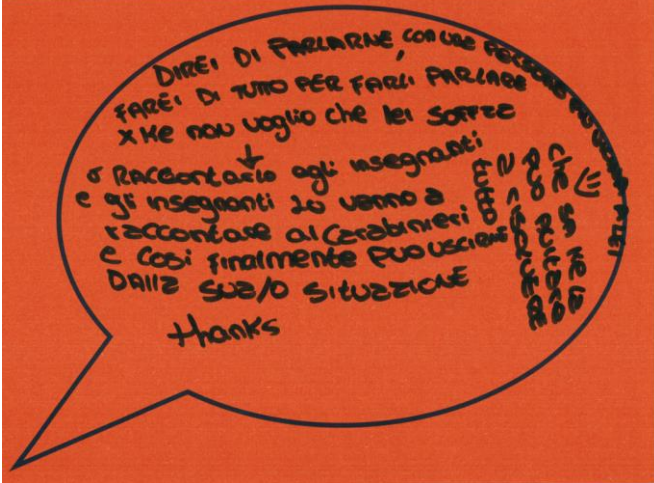

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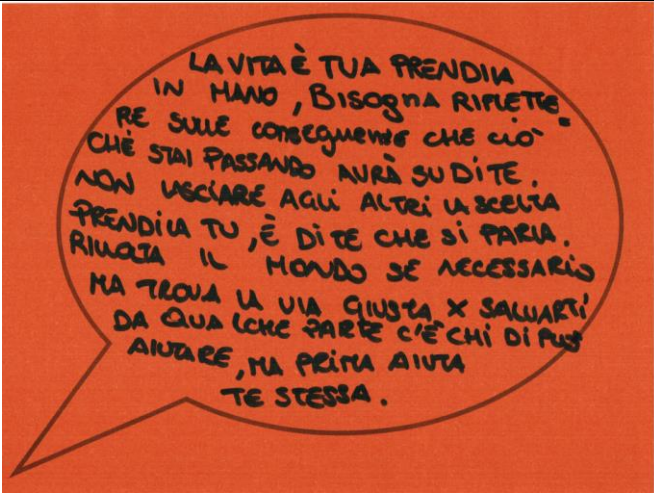

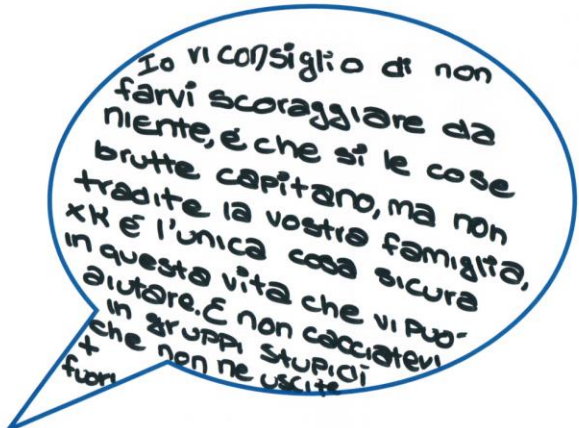
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The messages for other girls

	
<p>Whatever bad thing happen to you, don't ever give up on what you're doing, and push ahead with strength.</p>	<p>Don't be afraid to assert your rights and above all else don't let others deceive you.</p>
	
<p>Let people help you. You don't have to be afraid of what other people say... and decide for yourself if something is wrong or right. Bye!!!</p>	<p>I would say to be careful about trusting people you shouldn't.</p>

 <p>Invece di fidarti subito di una persona.. prova a conoscerla meglio...</p>	 <p>Sii sempre convinta di quello che vuoi. Se lo vuoi veramente lo raggiungerai. VOLERE È POTERE! 😊</p>
<p>Instead of trusting someone immediately.. try getting to know them better...</p>	<p>Stay convinced about what you want. If you really want it, you will have it. WANTING IS POWER! ☺</p>
 <p>IS VERY IMPORTANT TO THINK before acting because this life living in Europe is not so Easy. Before Living you really need to ask and to know what you are going to do out there. Please think before acting. God know the best.</p>	 <p>1) PROVA A PARLARE CON LA PERSONA CON CUI NON VAI D'ACCORDO. SE PROPRIO NON RIESCI 2) CHIEDI AIUTO A UNA PERSONA VICINI TI PUO' E CHE TI POSSA AIUTARE E STARE VICINO! BUONA FORTUNA! 😊</p>
<p>Is very important to think before acting because this life living in Europe is not so easy. Before living you really need to ask and know what you going to do out there. Please think before acting. God know the best.</p>	<p>1) Try to talk with the person you don't get along with. If you just can't... 2) Ask someone you trust for help who can help you and stay by your side! Good luck!</p>

	
<p>Life is difficult, you need to deal with it, in good times and bad. Don't ruin your plans for the future.</p>	<p>Take care of yourself and not others. Confide your thoughts to animals because they listen and they make you feel better ☺</p>
	
<p>I would suggest talking to a person older than you are, who knows that she can help you fix everything. I would do anything to make a girl talk because I don't want her to suffer. Or tell your teachers and the teachers will go to the police and so, finally, you can get out of your situation. Thanks</p>	<p>Even if it's difficult, fight for what makes you HAPPY!</p>

	
<p>Your life is yours, take it by the hand. You need to think about the consequences of what's happening to you. Don't let others make choices for you, we're talking about you. Turn the world upside down if you need to. But find the right path to save yourself. Somewhere there's someone that can help you, but first you have to help yourself.</p>	<p>REACT and ask for help...</p>
	
<p>I recommend that you not get discouraged about anything, and that bad things happen, but don't betray your family, because it's the only sure thing in this life that can help you. And don't get caught up in stupid groups that are hard to escape from.</p>	

*"If the life we are living does not let us come to reality, what does?
But if you think before doing, I think it could be better, but I don't know about you.
Patience, they say, is really good to have. Who does not have patience, can't move forward in life.
But what if you are not able to see your dreams and your future? It just looks like you are no more in life,
you will feel so bad and frustrated. May God help us." [Nigerian girl]*