



EMPOWERING
CARE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY EUROPEAN COMPARATIVE REPORT RESEARCH

EMPOWERING CARE. Empowering girls in residential care
against violence against women.





Funded by the European Union



Empowering Care. Empowering girls in residential care against violence against women.
JUST/2012/DAP/AG/3078

January 2014



OULUN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY of OULU



Disclaimer: This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Funded by the European Union



INDEX

I INTRODUCTION.....	4
II METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE FIELDWORK.....	5
III COMPATARVE ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS	6
1. GIRLS.....	6
1.1. RESIDENTIAL CARE EXPERIENCES: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ELEMENTS.....	6
1.2. SOCIAL AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS.....	7
1.3. GENDER ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS.....	8
1.4. DEFINITIONS, OWN EXPERIENCES AND LEGITIMATION OF VIOLENCE	8
2. PROFESSIONALS.....	10
2.1. PROFESSIONALS’ VIEWS, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES.....	10

I INTRODUCTION

Empowering Care. Empowering girls in residential care against violence against women is a 2 year European project funded by the Daphne III Program of the European Commission lasting from January 2013 till December 2014. Empowering Care is developed, under the coordination of SURT. Fundació de Dones (Catalonia), by a multidisciplinary and transnational partnership comprising organisations from Bulgaria (Animus Association), Cyprus (Mediterranean Institute for Gender Studies), Finland (University of Oulu) and Italy (Tampep).

Empowering care project aims, on the one hand, at increasing knowledge on the prevalence and characteristics of experiences of violence and abused against girls aged 14-18 in residential care and under the legal responsibility of public authorities in 5 EU Member States: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Finland, Italy and Catalonia/Spain. On the other hand, the project aims at empowering young girls in residential care to protect and prevent themselves and their peers from violence.

In order to reach these aims, first of all, the partnership of the project carried out a qualitative research on the experiences of violence and abuse, perceptions of gender roles and intimate relationships of 14-18 aged girls in residential care in Catalonia, Bulgaria, Italy, Finland and Cyprus. Secondly, and on the basis of the comparative research results, an empowerment program will be elaborated and pilot tested with girls in residential care centres in the partner countries. As a result of these activities, a Manual for professionals will be published and disseminated among professionals.

As said, the first activity of the Empowering Care project has been the conduction of a EU-wide qualitative research on the prevalence and characteristics of experiences of different types of violence and abuse against girls in residential care, both before and after entering care institutions, as well as their beliefs regarding gender roles and stereotypes, and sexual and affective relationships. Each partner of the consortium has carried out the research in its country. With the results obtained with the analysis of the fieldwork, each organisation elaborated a country research report. The reports are available, both in English and in each national language (Bulgarian, Catalan, Greek, Finnish and Italian), in the website of the project (www.empoweringcare.eu). Moreover, a comparative report was elaborated on the basis of the country research reports and constitutes the EU-wide product of this first project activity. The Comparative Report is also available in the website of the project.

The aim of this Executive summary is to summarise the Comparative report and to present the main results obtained in the fieldwork carried out in the 5 countries. The summary contains a brief summary of the methodological framework and the development of the fieldwork of the research, and a brief presentation of the main results of the field work in each country. For a deeper inside in the research, it is recommended to read the full comparative report¹.

¹ The comparative report contains a large theoretical framework, as well as a legal framework, that may be useful to have a more comprehensive overview of the theme of the research.

II METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE FIELDWORK

At the beginning of the project the partnership set up a common methodological framework and ethical guidelines that guided the research and the fieldwork carried out by each national research team.

The methodology was based on qualitative research methods since they are more suitable in capturing the subjective experiences of women. Moreover, a qualitative approach provides a confidential and intimate atmosphere especially adequate to conduct research with minors, and especially those with institutional backgrounds, who may be reluctant to collaborate in more formal quantitative survey formats. The research techniques used were semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups. All research activities were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The target groups of the research were, on the one hand, minor girls living in residential care institutions and, on the other hand, professionals that work with them.

The participation of the girls was via individual interviews and/or focus groups. The aim of the individual interview to girls was to gather information about personal life stories, with a special focus on their experiences of violence. The aim of the focus groups with minor girls was to discuss and share perceptions and views around gender roles and gender stereotypes as well as patterns of behaviour in intimate relationships.

The participation of the professionals was also via individual interviews and/or discussion groups. The aim of the participation of the professionals was to gather professionals' perceptions, contributions and experience of working with girls. Perceptions, opinions and experiences of professionals provided valuable information on the cope and traits of girls' experiences of violence and abuse, gender roles and intimate relationships, as well as their own needs and difficulties as professionals in dealing and tackling with all that.

In most of the countries, the field work was developed from May to June 2013 (except from Cyprus where, due to several difficulties to get into the centre, the fieldwork was delayed and it took place in December 2013). In Bulgaria and Cyprus the fieldwork took place in one single centre, whereas in Catalunya, Finland and Italy several centres participated in the research. Adding up all the interviews and focus groups with girls in the 5 countries, a total of 100 girls (57 via interviews and 43 via focus groups) and 52 professionals participated in the research.

III COMPATARVE ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

A summary of the comparative analysis of the results obtained in the research carried out in Bulgaria, Catalonia, Italy Finland and Cyprus is presented below. The first part of the comparative analysis focuses on the main results obtained from the participation of the girls, covering issues related to girls' daily life in the centres, their social relations, their perceptions on gender roles and their own experiences of violence. The second part focuses on the voices of the professionals, their views on the girls' lives, the needs they face in their everyday work life as well as the opportunities that their job offer to them.

1. GIRLS

1.1. Residential care experiences: positive and negative elements

The country reports show that the experiences of girls living in residential care centres are diverse and that it is not possible to talk about a sole and unique experience. However, when analysing the national results some common elements can be found.

Girls from the 5 countries stated that the entrance to the centres was experienced as a difficult process and that the first month in the centre had been complicated and problematic. Some of the girls stated that the feelings they had when they entered the centre for the first time were loneliness, sadness, shamefulness and disorientation.

Girls from Catalonia shared the fact the even if at the beginning it was really hard, the centre was the best place where they could be. In the same direction, most of the girls from Bulgaria and Italy felt that the centre was a place of protection. Instead, in Finland, most of the girls showed a negative attitudes and feeling against the institution.

Even if the centres were seen as safe places and girls, it is important to state that most of the girls said that they would never choose to live in a centre far from their families and that they wish they never had to live in them. Regarding some negative aspects about the experience of living in the centre, the girls pointed out that just like the centres were spaces of protection, they also were spaces of limitation. Girls from the 5 countries expressed that the most difficult thing about living in the centre was to get used to the norms and the discipline rules of the institution.

Another relevant element pointed out by most of the girls from the 5 countries was how difficult it had been to leave their whole life behind once they entered into the centre.

1.2. Social and intimate relationships

Another element of analysis in the research was the characteristics of the social and intimate relationships that the girls living in residential care have or not have.

Regarding social relations inside the centre, most of the girls stated that, even though living together with other young women was not always easy, they had good relations with the others housemates. Moreover, most of the girls said that they had also good relations with the professionals, from whom they received support and care.

Regarding social relations in general, meaning mainly friendship, in most countries girls claimed that they had few friends. Girls from Bulgaria said that their friendship relations were limited to one or two girls. They expressed that they did not trust many people and that beyond this small circle of friends they were afraid of being betrayed and hurt. In this same line, Italian girls also had problems to trust people, which was an obstacle to build and maintain a stable social network. In Finland, girls explained that they did not have social network and that in general they were not satisfied with their personal relations. Moreover, as stated before, girls from Catalonia and Finland explained that it was really difficult for them to maintain friends they had before entering the centre.

Concerning the relations that girls establish with their family, girls from the 5 countries found themselves in similar situations. Some of the girls explained that had regular contact with their family and some others that the contact was rather sporadic and not regular. Finally, some girls explained that they had not contact with any member of their family.

Concerning intimate relations, Bulgarian and Cypriot girls explained that they did not have close intimate relations. By contrast, girls from Catalonia, Finland and Italy ensured that they did have intimate and sexual relations. From what the girls shared with the research teams regarding the relationship they establish with (mostly) boys, it can be said that, in general, those relations are based on unhealthy patterns. In this sense, for example, most of the Catalan girls who were dating were involved in noxious relationships based on emotional dependency and control. Even though some of the girls, especially from Italy and Catalonia, were able to identify alarm signs, i.e. elements that may indicate that the relation is taking a negative shift, they were involved in unequal and even violent relations in which patriarchal romantic love dynamics were reproduced.

To understand the fact that the vast majority of the girls are involved in unhealthy relationships, it is necessary to analyse their backgrounds and lives experiences. Their family relationships have been and are still complicated and, in many cases, violent. As a result, the huge lack of affection, the absence of family support and/or the abuse suffered by the girls have a direct impact not only on their emotional state but also on the kind of affective relationships they are able to establish. It is obvious that there are girls in care who, either because of their resilience or the therapeutic recovery work done with them, are able to break this pattern and establish healthy relationships, but unfortunately the great majority of the girls in care reproduce this relationship model. This, then, makes clear the need to work specifically and more exhaustively on promoting equal partner relationships and the prevention of male violence.

1.3. Gender roles and perceptions

Another core aspect being analysed in the 5 countries was whether or not girls living in residential care institutions reproduce traditional gender stereotypes with their narratives. In all countries, girls reproduced to a greater or lesser extent gender roles and stereotypes. In this sense, some girls from Bulgaria, Catalonia and Cyprus, for example, ensured that boys were stronger, naturally more aggressive than girls, as well as more easy going than girls. Moreover, they also claimed that girls were much more complicated and that their lives were more complex and difficult compared to boys' lives. Some of the girls ensured that girls are more passionate and more emotional than boys or that, at least, boys do not demonstrate their emotional part as much as girls do. The imagined ideas activated are worrying from a gender point of view. Namely, the expectations the young women project reproduce a system of patriarchal values and put women in a highly sexualized and devalued social position.

Despite the widespread presence of sexist stereotypes that reproduce and reinforce a highly patriarchal social picture among girls in residential care in the partner countries, some girls question certain ideas and claim that it is unfair that boys and girls are treated and brought up differently. It is interesting to see that the girls are able to identify how the upbringing and the patterns of socialization that are adopted throughout childhood and adolescence can have (and indeed do have) an impact on future attitudes and actions. In this respect, although in some cases the girls show a certain tendency to accept as normal and natural certain attitudes that are different between boys and girls, in other cases they are clear that it is a case of socially constructed and learnt differences. That is especially relevant for the girls living in Catalonia and in Italy.

1.4. Definitions, own experiences and legitimization of violence

All national reports provide information on the ways girls living in residential care define what violence means to them. Girls from Bulgaria, Catalonia, Finland, Italy and Cyprus provided several definitions of violence. In most of the cases, girls first referred to physical violence and then, with some more reflection, they also made some references to psychological violence. Only in few cases girls referred to sexual violence. One possible reason that may explain the fact that sexual violence is not identified straight away in some of the other countries is that it is still taboo, both for girls in care and for society in general, and that there are still many difficulties when mentioning it by name and talking about it. Other girls did not refer to specific types of violence, but they rather provided more general/generic definitions of violence and explained that violence was "when somebody forces you to do something you don't want to do" or "anything that hurts".

One of the criteria for the selection of the girls to be interviewed was that they had experienced violence. Thus, all girls that participated in the individual interviews had suffered some kind of violence. However, not all of them recognised or explained it during the interview. In Bulgaria, for example, some of the girls denied having suffered violence. These girls identified violence only in its extreme forms, and claimed not having been in these situations. In this sense, some of these girls understood violence as something normal and as an intrinsic part of their lives. As some of the Bulgarian girls, girls from other

countries also showed some reluctance to talk about their own stories of violence, which was completely understood and respected.

Other girls did talk about their experiences and shared with the research teams their stories. Girls from all countries had suffered physical, psychological and sexual violence. In most of the cases, girls explained that they had experienced all different kinds of violence, i.e. physical and psychological aggressions, sexual abuse, humiliation and being neglected. Some of the girls lived through one story of violence and others had been victims (and survivors) of different situations of violence. In most of the cases girls explained that the perpetrator was a family member or somebody they knew. It is precisely the fact that the perpetrator was a family member what generated more confusion, disorientation and distress among the girls.

Girls also shared which were their feelings when they were immersed in the situation of violence, which in some cases lasted for a long time. Girls from the 5 countries expressed that during the violent episodes they felt completely disoriented and without knowing what to do or to whom ask for help. Most of the girls explained that they could not tell anybody that they were suffering violence and that made them feel really alone.

It is also interesting to point out that some girls from Bulgaria, Catalonia and Finland normalised or belittled the violence that they were suffering, especially when it was exerted by a close family member (father or mother, for example). Depending on the age, it may be possible that the reality lived at home is the only reality known and thus, somebody may understand that the use of violence in human relations is the “normal” way to proceed. Some girls explained that they realised that there was something wrong in their home when they got to see other families and other realities.

The impacts of the violence suffered were strong and diverse. In some cases girls felt guilty for the violence suffered and for being placed in the centre. Whereas some of the girls felt somehow responsible for everything that had happened to them, others verbalised that what they had been through was not at all their responsibility. Girls explained that during the episodes of violence they felt sad, ashamed, disoriented and lost. Most of them had low self-esteem and had great difficulties to establish healthy and trustful relations with others, especially with adults and with men (in cases of sexual abuse). Moreover, some of the girls had physical and psychological health problems due to the violence suffered.

Another important issue that was discussed during the individual interviews was if the girls would ever justify the use of violence. In front of this question, suggested directly or indirectly, the answers of the girls from the 5 countries were diverse. Some of the girls from Finland and Catalonia, for example, had normalised violence and they themselves were using it towards others. Some others girls from Catalonia manifested to be against the use of violence but explained that there were some occasions that violence could be justified. Other girls from Bulgaria said that they had a desire of revenge and that they would beat other people if they could. The girls in Cyprus talked about ‘slamming’ others to the floor if the need came to defend a younger brother or sister, seeing this as a legitimate way to protect the ones they care for. Finally, there was another group of girls from Catalonia and Italy that stated that violence was never a legitimated or justified answer.

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

2. PROFESSIONALS

2.1. Professionals' views, needs and opportunities

In order to have a complete and comprehensive picture of the life of the girls living in residential care institutions, professionals working with the girls participated in the field work either via individual interviews or focus groups.

The professionals stated that it was impossible to talk about general characteristics of girls living in residential care institutions. However, it is true that the great majority of the girls share some common elements such as having suffered violence (psychological, physical and/or sexual) and/or having been neglected by their family.

Professionals from the 5 countries ensured that it was not always easy to work with the girls and to talk about their stories of violence. Girls did not always want to talk about it either because they were afraid of being judged or wounded, or because the trauma was too recent and not elaborated. Indeed, professionals from the 5 countries ensured that it was difficult for them to create trusting bonds that enable good communication and the possibility to work on the trauma. Most of the professionals stated that to create strong trustful ties is the basis for a good intervention with the girls. Moreover, some professionals stated that in some cases an external professional was required. The idea of cooperation among existing resources was highly recommended and supported among professionals of the 5 countries.

Linked to the importance of creating stable and trustful links between the girls and the professionals, some professionals ensured that it was really important to carefully define the professionals' role.

The centres need to be spaces of protection and care and, thus, professionals working there need to be prepared to offer that to the girls. In this sense, most of the professionals who participated in the field work ensured that they felt capable of working where they worked. However, extra training would be a bonus and would help them to offer a better attention to the girls. Professionals from Finland and Catalonia, for example, stated that it would be interesting to receive training on violence.

Finally, it is interesting to point out that the centres of the 5 countries share that they do not implement specific programmes for the prevention of violence and on the promotion of gender equality. Even though some of the professionals showed some concern on the fact that most of the relations in which girls were involved were no healthy relations and that the role models which girls had been in contact with were not good ones, no specific work on gender equality was done. It is true that some

professionals, especially in Catalonia, pointed out that the prevention of violence was done in their daily activities. However, the research shed light on the need to work on gender mainstreaming within residential care centres.

Linked with the lack of gender-based programmes, it is important to say that most of the professionals from Bulgaria, Italy and Catalonia could not find really big differences between boys and girls. Some of the professionals who did find some difference referred to the fact that “boys are more physical and girls more emotional” or that it was “easier to work with boys than with girls” or the other way around. However, no gender analysis of the differences between boys and girls was done. On the other hand, professionals from Finland did consider that there were great difference between boys and girls. In both cases, sensitisation on gender issues would be necessary since in any case **there was** a gender analysis of the difference encountered or not encountered.

Most of the professionals showed great admiration for the work they were doing. All of them agreed that it was a really challenging and complex job. They were aware of the responsibility they had being in the educators and, probably, the main referent figures of adolescent girls. However, most of the professionals ensured they enjoyed their work.