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The Dynamics of Secondary Victimization: When Social Workers Blame Mothers

Abstract

The article describes the main results from a qualitative research project, which analyzes the relations between mothers exposed to gender-based violence and child protection social workers, looking at the risk of secondary victimization. The issue emerged from 10 years' experience as a social worker at a women's shelter where I was required several times to mediate the difficult relationship between child protection social worker and mother. The starting point was a preliminary field research with peers (staff members of women's shelters) and women who had been blamed for the violence by their child protection social worker. These results formed the basis for the interviews held with child protection social workers. The analysis shows how victim–offender dynamics might also influence social work practices and illustrate the connections between dynamics of secondary victimization and the expectations regarding mothers and victims. Furthermore, some positive examples of support emerged which could be used as a basis for developing targeted methods for social work practice.

Keywords

social work practice, secondary victimization, childcare services, gender-based violence, mothering

Leaving a violent partnership is never a linear process, and this becomes even more complicated when children are involved. Women who experience violence are in a highly vulnerable and complex situation and need specific support and understanding. It should therefore be self-evident that professionals require specific training to raise their awareness of the dynamics involved and enable them to implement targeted working methods that meet the individual needs of survivors of gender-based violence. This article describes some of the findings from a qualitative research project carried out in 2017, which analyzes the relations between mothers exposed to gender-based violence and child protection social workers, looking specifically at the risk of secondary victimization. The research was carried out with the social services in South Tyrol, Northern Italy. The issue being studied results from 10 years' experience as a social worker at a women's shelter where I supported women who have survived gender-based violence.

Several times, I was required to mediate in the difficult relationship between child protection social workers and mothers seeking help. I observed that gender-based violence triggers a wide range of emotions, even among social workers. Such emotions, especially when they are not examined, influence working attitudes and further complicate the relationship with the survivor and effective support is not always provided. In many cases, I was puzzled as to what had happened, and I noticed how challenging such situations can be, especially for mothers but also for child protection social workers. My research with child protection social workers attempts to gain greater insight into the often difficult dynamics of this working relationship, as well as to identify suggestions to develop more supportive practices. Through exchanges with peers, interviews with mothers who have survived gender-based violence and child protection social workers, it was possible to describe in greater detail the often hostile and complex situations mothers and also social workers have to deal with and to identify protective elements of support which could be incorporated within social work practices.

Background to the Research

The issue identified has been explored by different research projects. The problematic relations between child protection social workers and mothers who have survived gender-based violence are widespread and global as shown by international research, such as for Canada (Bourassa et al., 2008; Freymond, 2003; Lapierre, 2008; Melchiorre & Vis, 2013), the United States (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Lapierre & Côté, 2011), Australia (Cooley & Frazer, 2006), and Europe (Crawford et al., 2009; Garcia, 2014; Keeling & Wormer, 2012). The

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impression given is that, just as the dynamics of gender-based violence are similar throughout societies based on patriarchal values, so the problematic response of child protection social workers also has interesting parallels despite extensive geographic and cultural differences. How can we make sense of this observation and interpret such complexity?

One approach is to begin with the feature that is common among such societies, namely, their patriarchal social system. A critical analysis of this value system, which also forms the basis of European societies, could be used as a means of understanding relations within such a society between child protection social workers and women who have survived gender-based violence. (Göttner-Abendroth, 2011; Keeling & Wormer, 2012; Shpungin et al., 2012; Strasser, 2001). Patriarchal societies have their own particular value system that orients and underpins social interactions and family structures with differing degrees of kinship, with different outcomes for the code of conduct and associated legal framework (Macdonald, 2009). One crucial aspect to bear in mind is that it is highly complex and sometimes difficult to explore a system we have grown up with and whose "commonsense" view forms an integral part of how we perceive the world around us. Consequently, the results and findings of modern matriarchal studies, which reveal different types of social organization, have been essential in order to acquire the critical view that is required from the outside looking in. This serves as a starting point for a more in-depth analysis of the consequences of a hostile patriarchal system for the relationship between child protection social workers and mothers who have survived gender-based violence (Fleiss, 2007; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011; Werlhof, 2010).

Patriarchal societies can be described according to their three fundamental pillars, which complement and interact with each other. Firstly, androcentrism, which affirms the central status of the male gender in the society, acting as the prototype for humans. Women are seen as incomplete and defective, this being the basic argument for male dominance over women. The second pillar is anthropocentrism, which starts with the assumption that human beings (¼man) represent the culmination of the creation and must therefore dominate nature. The division between reason (man, civilization, and god) and nature (chaotic wildness, barbarous crudeness, and woman) justifies the exploitation of resources regardless of the destruction of nature (Federici, 2015; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011). The patriarchal ideology focuses on the idea of emancipation from earth's boundaries toward a different and better world, one that does not exist in reality (Werlhof, 2010). The third pillar, which helps to identify a patriarchal society, is global and ideological imperialism. This ideology lies behind the claim to power over other cultures and their forced assimilation. In contrast, the central value observed throughout matriarchal societies is life, and all actions are carried out and rules established based on protecting this (Göttner-Abendroth, 2009; Sanday, 2000). Patriarchal societies, however, can be described as hostile since dominance, the destruction of life, and continued accumulation of goods and property are central elements (Federici, 2015; Göttner-Abendroth, 2013; Werlhof, 2010).

This social structure has had, and still has, serious consequences for motherhood and requires an in-depth understanding because the values attributed to motherhood are key to the dynamics of blaming survivors of gender-based violence. Historically, the origins of patriarchy in Western Europe and its ubiquitous expansion date from approximately 4,000–6,000 years ago (DeMeo, 2009; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011). A new definition of family along patrilineal and patrilocal lines disrupts the matrilineal transfer of knowledge by forcing women to leave their home/clan after marriage and follow their partner who has ownership claims over his wife and children. These initial steps of disengaging women from motherhood by introducing the relationship or kinship tie of a "father" have been accentuated over the millennia and were brought to a head in the greatest femicide in human history—the burning of witches (Federici, 2015). The elimination of the last remnants of women's sovereignty was decisive for the introduction of the concept of the so-called maternal instinct proposed by some of the major (male) thinkers of the last century, such as Rousseau and Freud (Federici, 2015; Tazi-Preve, 2017). The systematic disempowerment of women, combined with the destruction of transferring "motherhood-knowledge" from generation to generation, still influences the whole process of procreation, birth, relations and education of children (O'Reilly, 2016).

Beginning with Rousseau and later complemented by Freud, the concept of an all-sacrificing and all-knowing mother and the nurturing mother/breadwinning father became part of motherhood, placing women in the position of being a good mother; an unwinnable position because it is unattainable. In accordance with this concept, the worst crime a mother can commit is to "neglect her children" (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Macdonald, 2009).

The science of education also developed within this new definition of motherhood, with emphasis being placed on new mothers becoming a mother by forgetting their needs as a woman. Birth and motherhood became a public space controlled by the state (Federici, 2015). Consequently, contemporary child protection social services can also be interpreted as a fundamental element of state control over motherhood. External people are the accepted experts regarding the family system and are responsible for improving people's education and skills, in my experience focusing particularly on mothers. Based on Keeling and Wormer (2012), for the following anal- ysis, it is also essential to reflect on how the practices of social work might have become patriarchalized as the profession developed.

To further our understanding of the patriarchal family structure, it is also important to take a look at the other family members and what is required in order to be considered a "good father" and "good child." In the last few decades, the concept of patrilineal fatherhood has been redefined (Peled, 2000). Nevertheless, we need to begin our analysis based on the introduction of the father relationship or kinship in the family structure since, unlike the mother relationship, fatherhood is a

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patriarchal concept of kinship (Fleiss, 2007; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011; Werlhof, 2010). Briefly, and obviously rather simplistically, we might say that such a concept of fatherhood does not focus first and foremost on establishing an educational/caring relationship with children but rather on claims of male ownership and private property, resulting in the need for heirs (Fleiss, 2007; Mulak, 2006).

Even today, although Italian law has changed its definition of fatherhood and both motherhood and fatherhood now have the same rights and duties, in everyday life attitudes regarding what makes a "good mother" and a good father are still different (Macdonald, 2009). Similar differences between formal standards and everyday practices can also be observed relating to the role of children. Briefly, on the one hand, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) declares children to be autonomous subjects who should be heard in all matters affecting their lives. On the other hand, also shown by the results from interviews with social workers, in most cases even child protection professionals never meet the child they are actually meant to protect (Roose et al., 2013).

This short review of the patriarchal ideology sets the scene for my reflections based on an exploration of the perception and representations of mothers and violence by practitioners in the field of child protection.

Method

This qualitative field study took place within the child protection social services in South Tyrol, Northern Italy. It is oriented on the principles of feminist research (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Mies, 2008; Shpungin et al., 2012). The aim of adopting a feminist methodology is to start a research inquiry, which encourages an awareness process among all participants, and further, it attempts to embed the results in the actual social context, via a system-critical analysis (Mies, 2008). Additionally, a feminist perspective allows overcoming androcentric assumptions, which is an important step to deepen the understanding of the complex dynamics of gender-based violence within social work practices. Moreover, it tries to incentive transformative processes, in this specific case, focusing on the development of forward looking methods and techniques for social work practices.

The starting point was 10 years of working experience as social worker in a women's shelter, which raised my interest to have a look on the applied methods and techniques in child protection social work practices regarding gender-based violence. Comparing my experiences with the literature review mentioned above I decided to conduct a preliminary field research carried out through several informal exchanges with peers (staff members from women's shelters) combined with a structured interview with a peer and two women who had survived gender-based violence and had been blamed for it by their child protection social worker. The results from this preliminary research formed the basis for structuring the interviews held with social workers employed in child protection services. In contrast to the very open form of the narrative interviews with the peers and affected women, the problem-centered guided interviews (Schmidt-Grunert, 2004) with child protection social workers were more structured and divided up into two parts.

The first part was a short questionnaire to get a better understanding of the individual background of the social worker in question. The second part started with a case vignette of a fictitious family situation, which the child protection social workers might encounter in their work:

> Mrs. Mair has gone to the social services to ask a child protection social worker for support. She is particularly worried about her 12-year-old son who has been refusing to go to school for weeks. Her daughter (8), on the other hand, is a calm girl, a little shy but very hard-working and well behaved. Over 2 different weekends, Mrs. Mair has stayed at women's shelter because her husband has a tendency to act violently, especially when he is drunk. Mrs. Mair continued to speak, lowering her voice and looking away, saying: "Well, as I have no income, my husband told me they would take my children away from me if I left him." She also stressed the importance, in her opinion, of her children growing up in a real family and said she would do anything to ensure this is the case. Mrs. Mair explained why she believed her husband punished her, describing herself as too sensitive and weak in the education of her children. Mrs. Mair also said she was afraid her son's absence from school would upset her husband even further and cause him to drink even more. She feels she has failed, although she only wants the best for her children. Now she has asked the child protection social worker for help to get her son back to school.

The aim of this research method is to focus on people's individual experiences and to discover the subjective logic behind their actions, forming the basis for an expert's reactions and actions. By using case vignettes, we can look beyond "espoused" theories and reveal deep-seated personal behaviors, helping us to differentiate between professional attitudes based on expert knowledge and deduced and/or subjective working methods and partially instinctive actions (Stiehler et al., 2012).

The case vignette was complemented with a guided interview using open questions to further explore the statements made by the child protection social worker. These open questions were especially useful for me and were based on specific topics appearing in the literature and also in the interviews held previously (Schmidt-Grunert, 2004). The interviews ended with each child protection social worker being given the chance to complement what they had said with any topics they believed to be important for the research project.

In order to guarantee an open and unbiased interview situation, it was important to me to contact child protection social workers I did not met in my working context. This was quite challenging because as I worked myself in the small region of South Tyrol (Italy), in the course of the years I had numerous contacts to many child protection social workers. Therefore, I decided to request support from my colleagues and asked them to name some child protection social workers with whom they have had positive or negative experiences. Adopting a logic of

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purposeful sampling (Rapley, 2014), the qualifying criteria I generated were as follows (a) operative social worker, (b) working in the region of South Tyrol, (c) working actually in child protection social work services, (d) the colleagues asked for support should have had positive or negative experiences with the child protection social worker.

Based on the names my colleagues gave to me I contacted 11 child protection social workers and 7 of them accepted to be interviewed, 1 had already changed the area she worked in, and 3 did not answer the e-mail. Considering the research topic could be described as potentially "hot" because of the strong emotions related to this field and because such research might be misconstrued as controversial in its intent, I was surprised by this high positive response rate (64%). In contrast, a similar Canadian study describes more difficulties in finding social workers. The researchers contacted 65 social workers but only 25 of them agreed to take part in the research (38.5%) (Bourassa et al., 2008).

A research project such as mine certainly has some critical ethical issues. The challenge was to deepen a highly sensitive and controversial topic, without disregarding the dignity of the interviewees maintaining a respectful relationship. Particularly helpful were the ethical guidelines elaborated by the Italian "commissione per l'etica della ricerca e bioetica" (2017) as well as ethical discussions on qualitative research (Kirby et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2012). Further, the ethical standards required by the university were met through the entire research process. One key point, already present while selecting potential interview partners, was to guarantee their privacy and make the interviewee feel comfortable, even when addressing potentially sensitive topics. For this research project, all interviews were anonymized, guaranteeing texts could not be traced back to the particular person being interviewed. This was not a trivial issue as South Tyrol is a small region and social workers often know each other. Moreover, all interviewees were informed about the intentions and aims of the research. They participated on a voluntary basis and all gave their written informed consent.

The audiotapes from the interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture the richness of the data. The transcriptions kept the original flow, retaining the wording of the participants, discourse markers, and gaps in speech. The data analysis followed an inductive approach embedded in an iterative process of progressive data analysis (Kirby et al., 2010). The starting point was an open coding focusing on themes, common and uncommon patterns. As illustrated in detail afterward, the second round of coding was more focused and had a stronger link to theories, which supported significantly the identification of main categories.

Results

Reexperiencing Powerlessness

The informal exchanges with peers and the more structured interviews held with a peer (a staff member from a women's shelter) and women who had survived gender-based violence formed part of the exploratory preliminary study. However, here I will provide merely a summary of the main points that emerged and relate these points to the literature and to my experience. Regarding child protection social workers, peers mentioned instances of inadequate expertise and frequent misinterpretation of the "pretended neutrality" employed to impartially assess the dynamics of a family. The peers felt that, at the very least, child protection social workers should have taken the position of the child they were meant to protect. The peers interviewed also mentioned the element of fear which may be experienced by child protection social workers in cases of gender-based violence, especially when they have to face perpetrators with a respected or powerful position in society and high self-esteem. " . . . in case of doubt, it's easier to be on the powerful side . . . " (Int. Peer).

The interviews with mothers who had survived gender-based violence reveal, through practical examples, different forms secondary victimization can take. The women interviewed confirmed the lack of sensitivity and understanding they had encountered, accompanied by a feeling that they were weak in terms of the pressures they had to manage, a feeling also created by the child protection social workers avoiding taking any clear position. As one of the women reported, she was forced to arrange visits between the father/perpetrator and her children even though they had actually been exposed to his violent actions. " . . . they (child protection social workers) told me that I have to take my children to him, and so I tried to explain to them again . . . ." (Int. woman (W) 1) " . . . the impression I got was that they didn't know what to say . . . . in some kind of way they helped me . . . . but nevertheless I often felt left alone . . . " (Int. W1)

According to my observations, the narratives of the women and the literature, such situations are worse when a woman does not match the stereotype of a victim. Women who have survived gender-based violence and accepted the label of "victim" are more likely to be supported by social workers than those who are not passive, suffering, or helpless (Kavemann, 2010; Moser, 2007). One possible reason for this attitude is the misinterpretation of the survival tactics women adopted, by the practitioners decoding the situation as something the women had tried to achieve or wanted (Moser, 2007). This argument is used afterward to justify withdrawing support and trust by child protection social workers, without realizing that, in this way, they are supporting the perpetrator and significantly increasing the potential harm to children exposed to the violence. The analyses provided by Watson (2002) regarding the definition and implementation of "empowerment" are also relevant here: "it (empowerment) becomes an activity that managers do to workers and practitioners to clients . . . this model of individual empowerment clearly allows the powerful to maintain control of the process." According to the interviews held with women, it is difficult for users of the social services to remove themselves from their control and power mechanisms without negative consequences.

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A central starting point for the interpretation of the interviews held with child protection social workers is an awareness that survivors of gender-based violence may incur secondary victimization in two different ways: the first related to motherhood and the second related to the ideal of victim which they have to fit with.

The Reproduction of the Cycle of Violence

As the views provided by the women and peers interviewed were not particularly positive, the second step of my research has been to try and understand how such actions were perceived by social workers in child protection. The interviews were very productive and could be analyzed from different angles. Guided by the principles of the qualitative content analysis approach (Schreier, 2014), I started with an open coding of the transcripts. First, I focused on the elements that described the working context of the interviewed child protection social worker like working hours per week, number of cases, and professional experience.

The first point to be highlighted, looking at the interviews, is that all the social workers described their workload as too heavy: "… excessive, impossible to put up with, taking care of 42 families … it's not possible for a social worker to put up with such numbers, working 38 hours a week … " (Int. child protection social worker [CPSW] a). This is certainly an aspect to be taken into account because working with survivors of gender-based violence requires being emotionally available, and there is a great need for time to reflect. All the dynamics described in the next part of this chapter could be ascribed partly to such working conditions.

A second significant element is the number of families related to gender-based violence the child protection social workers have to deal with. Although all child protection social workers confirmed that cases were assigned at random, a significant difference can be seen. Those social workers working fewer hours a week deal with more families with problems of gender-based violence (averaging 37.69% of the families) than social workers who work more hours a week (averaging 8.76% of the families). A similar difference can be observed in terms of professional experience. More experienced child protection social workers also support a larger number of families where gender-based violence occurs. There might be many different reasons for these differences, and given the small number of child protection social workers interviewed, it is not possible to make a universally valid statement, but some suggestions can nevertheless be noted. It is self-evident that working fewer hours a week might have a positive effect on the mental state of child protection social workers, and this might improve the quality of their work, enhancing their assessment skills. Professional experiences might also be key to diagnosing gender-based violence, which often is disguised behind complex familiar structures.

The next step of my analysis focused on the contents of the narrations of the child protection social workers and started with an open coding focusing on common and uncommon themes. During the second round of coding, strong similarities between the behaviors of child protection social workers and the perpetrators' behaviors became evident. This was for me like an "aha-moment" and led me to the decision to use the classic attitudes of perpetrators described in the literature (Keeling & Wormer, 2012) as main categories, complementing them with correlated subcategories to gain a deeper understanding on specific aspects. This article focuses on the six key aspects related to representation and processes, which form the basis of a secondary victimization spiral in which survivors tend to be caught (Herman, 2006; Lapierre, 2008; Lapierre & Côté, 2011).

1. "It was an effective way as the parents were very scared"—Intimidating Survivors

The risk of losing their children if they break off the relationship is one of the most frequently used threats by perpetrators toward the women interviewed. Several women/mothers have lived with this constant fear for years and feel imprisoned by their relationship and unable to identify any way to alter their situation. It is self-evident that, in those cases where a woman has decided to leave her violent partner, she can be retraumatized when a child protection social worker repeat the perpetrator's threat. Especially in those cases, where being a good mother is the last positive aspect of their identity, the attribute they were able to maintain during the violence they experienced, it can be a fatal blow when child protection social workers (the official experts for children's welfare) undermine this attribute. Survivors once again feel impotent, scared, and confronted with the imminent danger of being destroyed (Herman, 2006). Nevertheless, child protection social workers often mention the possibility of having to remove the children. One specific social worker even described "threats" as a successful strategy in situations of gender-based violence " it was a very effective way as the parents were very scared" (Int. CPSW g). He adopted this working strategy in combination with defusing the violence by redefining it as relational conflict, also applying the method of mediation (which is nevertheless prohibited in at least 33 European countries in cases of gender-based violence, Italy included). The child protection social worker further described the positive effects his threats to both parents had, as they started to collaborate by changing their behavior. It remains unclear how the parents coped with the threat of losing their children but certainly several questions arise. Particularly, I would highlight the lack of comprehensible reasons, which led the child protection social worker to choose working methods, which do not differentiate between perpetrator and survivor.

2. "Where the man remains the patriarch and has the final say"—Insisting on Male Privilege

Male stereotypes and privileges arise from patriarchal ideologies and are still used to legitimize gender-based violence. For example, one child protection social worker changes his definition of violence when he is working with families with

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different cultural backgrounds, explaining that "over there" (i.e., in that particular case) women have to accept being subordinated, arguing that: "… the man remains the patriarch and has the final say … " (Int. CPSW g). In the interviews, another child protection social worker accepts more aggressive behavior from male perpetrators:

> Answer the man is much more aggressive because he changed his social worker several times; it's important to take this into account as he isn't someone who can stay here Question: And the women, hasn't she changed social worker several times?—Answer: Yes, she has, but she's more placatory—he becomes aggressive at the drop of a hat " (Int. CPSW d)

3. "The girl was expected to make the effort"—Exploiting Children

According to my professional experience and also to exchanges with peers and the women interviewed, the message given by child protection social workers to survivors of gender-based violence is often ambiguous. On the one hand, they try to support mothers and children to protect them from violence, while on the other hand, irrespective of any ongoing violence, children are forced to remain in contact with the father/perpetrator. Child protection social workers sometimes ignore the fact that violence against children often increases during separation (Peled, 2000) and do not take into account the fact that children also need time to recover from the violence they have been exposed to. Children's rights tend to be subordinated to the father's rights (Kavemann & Kreyssig, 2013; Strasser, 2001). One child protection social worker described a situation of ongoing psychological and economic violence against the woman/mother after separation, in which case she nevertheless insisted on unaccompanied visits between the children and the father, although there was no court order to that effect. She justified this decision by arguing that " Well, I think the children don't really notice it now because he still controls her … . but it's different now "(Int. CPSW c). Her explanation becomes more paradoxical when she describes afterward how one child from this family is particularly traumatized, for whom she needed to arrange specific psychological support.

The testimony of another child protection social worker is similarly contradictory, describing analogous cases where, in spite of ongoing violence, she is convinced the children should see their father regularly. A third child protection social worker referred to a situation where the terrified 6-year-old girl had been persuaded by psychologists to meet the aggressor/father, even though he continued to stalk the girl and her mother. The child protection social worker concluded his explanation with the words: "… the girl was expected to make the effort " (Int. CPSW g). In fact, the child protection social worker blamed the mother for the ongoing violence because she did not agree to visits between the father/perpetrator and daughter/survivor. A fourth child protection social worker agreed with this view, stressing that violent men can also be good fathers. She argued that such violence is based on a culturally conditioned image of women, linked to emotional dysfunction, and with no negative impact on the father–child relationship, especially when the children are young. Such attitudes based on patriarchal stereotypes are contrary to international victim protection standards and underline how secondary victimization occurs. International studies show how humiliated children feel when they are forced to visit their father/perpetrator, feeling that the social services did not protect them but rather dismissed them (Kavemann & Kreyssig, 2013; Strasser, 2001).

4. "Maybe two slaps a year, nothing severe"—Minimizing Violent Episodes

One of the most common behaviors of male perpetrators is to minimize and trivialize the violence, and the same attitude has also been observed in the working practices of some child protection social worker (Humphreys, 2008; Lapierre, 2008). For example, one of the child protection social workers interviewed described a situation of ongoing psychological violence where some physical abuse also happened over the years. In his explanation, to a large extent he ignored the control and domination carried out by the perpetrator and also minimized the violent episodes saying: " maybe two slaps a year, nothing severe " (Int. CPSW g). The majority of the child protection social workers interviewed placed more importance on physical abuse than psychological or economic abuse. Moreover, they hardly mentioned sexual abuse, underlining the taboo concerning this subject, also known as the "forgotten topic" (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2014; Kavemann, 2010). According to international research, trivializing or minimizing violence reinforces the shame and guilt felt by survivors and deters women from leaving (Crawford et al., 2009).

5. "I felt humiliated by the social worker"—Denying Violent Episodes

Denying violence is one of the most effective ways to call into question the credibility of survivors. The misplaced claim of child protection social workers that they are "neutral" or "objective" makes it easier for perpetrators to cover up and deny their violent behavior. It is important to remember that a neutral position cannot be maintained when dealing with interpersonal violence (Herman, 2006). The interviews also showed that it is easier to put oneself in the shoes of a perpetrator since this requires an observer to be passive, reinforcing the perpetrator's position of power over the victim/s by remaining silent and looking away. The perpetrator does not need to change his behavior or bear the consequences. However, if observers put themselves in the shoes of the survivor, they are automatically forced to become active and try to offer protection and/or support.

Furthermore, child protection social workers may also become actively involved in covering up violence, using inappropriate language, which encourages survivors to remain silent. For example, one child protection social worker often uses the term "family problems" when talking about violent

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episodes. Also, one of the women interviewed during the exploratory study described how she struggled to explain to her child protection social worker the violence she suffered, ending her explanation with the words “ it was impossible for me to make her understand ” (Int. W2). Especially when the woman leaves the perpetrator, child protection social workers often automatically assume that the violence has stopped. Violent episodes after the relationship has ended are ignored or not taken seriously, placing the survivors in a desperate position because the opposite actually happens; i.e. the perpetrator’s power increases. Survivors again feel misunderstood and shamed, as one women admitted in tears during her interview: “… I felt humiliated by the social worker ” (Int. W2)

6. “There’s the risk that women take advantage of their experiences”—Blaming the Victim

Perpetrators often shift responsibility for the violence onto survivors, accusing them of provoking the abuse—describing the situation as if they had no choice and were forced to act violently. A similar attitude has also been observed in the working practices of child protection social workers, albeit much more subtle and therefore more difficult to pinpoint. Four child protection social workers described situations in which the woman struggled with the decision of whether she should leave her violent partner. One of the child protection social workers intervened, asking for support from the juvenile court judge to stop the woman from returning to the perpetrator, arguing that she would be exposing her children to a potentially harmful situation. Similar situations were described by the other child protection social workers, blaming survivors, threatening them with their children being taken away if they did not take a clear stance and leave their partner.

At such times, the responsibility for the violence shifts from the perpetrator to the survivors. None of the four child protection social workers held the man/partner/father/perpetrator accountable for the violence. Quite the opposite: The survivor became the perpetrator because she was actively exposing her children to the violence and failing to protect them. Another child protection social worker talked about the difficulties some women face regarding the decision to leave their violent partner or not. “… if you know if you decide to return to a situation like that, if you choose it at some point you have to accept it and stop saying this is abuse ” (Int. CPSW g)

This shows that higher standards of child protection and parenting skills are demanded of mothers, although they are in a highly vulnerable situation. International studies have called this phenomenon the “invisible man syndrome” (Hum- phreys, 2008) and suggest it is a basic requirement for victim- blaming attitudes.

Through this attitude, the aforementioned patriarchal stereotypes—the all-sacrificing mother, the all-knowing mother, and the nurturing mother/breadwinning father—are reinforced with negative consequences for survivors. Furthermore, the complexity and limited scope of child protection social workers to act also become evident. Especially in situations where the family still lives together, any obvious confrontation of the perpetrator must be planned in advance since disrupting the silence concerning such violence might reinforce it and put the lives of the woman and children at risk. Consequently, the first measures taken should always focus on protecting survi- vors and should be discussed with the mother.

Another mechanism for blaming victims was observed when two child protection social workers described a survivor of gender-based violence as someone who generally cannot be seen only as a victim but who tries to capitalize on the abuse by claiming services with an accusatory and rigid attitude. According to their interpretation, gender-based violence is used by women as an additional argument to demand specific help which gives them an advantage over other service users. This shift in focus on professional attitudes is not supported by the facts. Although they may be eligible for a safe place at a women’s shelter, women surviving gender-based violence in South Tyrol (Italy) have no particular rights nor do they receive any specific support from social services more than other service users. Indeed, this description shows that child protection social workers tend to withdraw or cut their support when a survivor does not match the stereotype of a passive, suffering, and helpless victim (Kavemann & Kreyssig, 2013; Moser, 2007).

Another child protection social worker shares this opinion, talking about a situation where, although she had personally witnessed death threats by the perpetrator against the women in her office, she believed that she was mistaken in providing the woman with support, apparently because, after only 6 months at a shelter, the woman managed to sort out the father–child contact situation on her own and rebuilt an independent life without negotiating this beforehand with the social worker. The way in which this child protection social worker perceives the woman’s behavior reveals the limited degree of empowerment accepted for survivors of gender-based violence. As mentioned above, empowerment is often defined positively as long as the person in power maintains control of the process (Watson, 2002). Because the woman she talked about did not fit the pattern of the “ideal victim,” the child protection social worker withdrew her support.

Conclusion

There are different ways to describe why victim–offender dynamics also influence the working practices of child protection social workers. I have illustrated these dynamics by analyzing the different findings of the interviews with different parties. The preliminary research with peers and women turned out as a very important step to understand the complexities of gender-based violence. The focus of the main research was on the narrations of child protection social workers and their daily working routine. The explanations and descriptions provided show how child protection social workers often adopt the classic attitudes of perpetrators whose aim is to maintain their control over the victims, such as intimidation, insisting on the

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man's rights and privileges, exploiting children, playing down and/or denying violent episodes, and/or blaming survivors.

It is highly complex to discuss gender-based violence because this is related to a form of violence which had been legally acceptable in Italy until a couple of decades ago and is still rooted in the value system that underpins Italian, as well as south-Tyrolean, society. The arguments used to justify male violence against women are still familiar and used by institutions. No social worker can define herself or himself as unaffected by this since we have all grown up with this system of common sense. Gender-based violence forms a part of and is systematized by every patriarchal society. Consequently, further in-depth research should also be carried out on the dynamics across societies and the transgenerational transfer of trauma, which might complement the explanations provided here (Federici, 2015; Huber & Plassmann, 2012).

I can conclude that there are two ways in which survivors of gender-based violence may experience secondary victimization: one because of the expectations regarding mothers and the other because of the expectations regarding victims. It is necessary to raise awareness of how ideologies, common sense, and ingrained habits related to motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood can significantly influence the work of child protection social workers. Greater awareness and critical reflection are fundamental to achieve high qualitative standards by social work professionals (Fargion, 2009).

Although my research uncovered a large number of negative examples and nonsupportive practices, I would also like to mention some positive examples of protection and support that emerged. Some child protection social workers emphasized the importance of building up a relationship of trust, of pro- viding survivors with information, and taking the side of the victims. Such points are in line with the key concepts of victim protection also mentioned in international studies (Cooley & Frazer, 2006; Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; Lapierre & Coˆte´, 2011). However, such positive examples are not based on a clear concept of supporting survivors of gender- based violence and did not form part of any clear or specific approach. Therefore, in some family situations, the child pro- tection social workers combined supportive practices with elements of secondary victimization.

This research has attempted to encourage reflection and stimulate discussion among all those involved. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon analyzed and the limited numbers of peers, women, and social workers interviewed, this research and the findings discussed in this article must be seen merely as a starting point for further research. Gender-based violence can be described as a complex abuse system and any response to it must therefore also be complex and proposed by a strong professional network. In order to prevent secondary victimization, there must be much more collaboration with specialized services, as well as greater awareness of the different methods and techniques established to carry out social work, which could be adapted to the everyday reality of each particular social service.

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