Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence: How to Prevent the Risk of Secondary Victimization

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Abstract
OBJECTIVES: The paper focusses on gender-based violence and child protection social work practices. Despite its high prevalence, gender-based-violence is often treated as marginal in child protection social services. The purpose of this article is to discuss possible forward-looking methods and techniques for child protection social work with survivors of gender-based violence. THEORETICAL BASE: The theoretical base is defined by adopting a feminist perspective, incorporating key aspects of the critical theory of patriarchy and the modern matriarchal studies. METHODS: The article provides a theoretical discussion based on the results of a qualitative research, which analysed the dynamics of secondary victimization in the relationship between mothers who survived gender-based violence and child protection social worker interlinked with the results from international research. OUTCOMES: The paper aims to focus attention on a complex issue. It uncovers some blind spots and highlights how motherhood and victimhood can be interpreted as risk factors, which increase victim-blaming attitudes. SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS: The article attempts to contribute to the current debate on this very important and widespread social issue, combining practical experience with broader theoretical considerations. Further, it opens the discussion on strategies for child protection social work practices, which might help to prevent dynamics of secondary victimization.

Keywords
gender-based violence, secondary victimization, child protection social work, social work practice, survivors, gender-based violence

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INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence against women is frequently treated as a marginal issue in child protection social work practices in spite of the fact that, according to the statistics, it is an issue that is widespread across all social classes, and not only in European countries. According to the most recent data for Europe, 22% of women from EU member states have experienced physical or sexual violence by their intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (European Union fundamental rights agency, 2014), while the UN figures show that, globally, one out of three women have experienced physical or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2018). Moreover, both psychological and economic violence should also be added to these data. It is difficult to find reliable data specifically on the links between gender-based violence and child protection social services. According to an Italian study carried out by the Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza, Terre des Hommes e Cismai (2015), one out of five children are supported by child protection social services because they have experienced violence. Furthermore, in a fifth of these cases witnessing gender-based violence was the main reason why the child protection social worker was called in.

Given this contradiction, the specific dynamics and correlated risks for survivors are often unknown and hidden behind supposedly more important issues that child protection social workers have to deal with. This article aims to highlight the complex needs which child protection social workers have to meet when working with women who have survived gender-based violence. It also attempts to uncover the deep-set attitudes and partially unconscious moral concepts which, quite unintentionally, may lead child protection social workers to blame the survivors of gender-based violence (Gracia, 2014). The concept of secondary victimization provides an effective way to describe and explain these dynamics. Applied to an empirical study carried out in 2017 in northern Italy (Fleckinger, 2017), which focussed on the relation between survivors of gender-based violence and child protection social workers, it was possible to highlight two key factors which increase the risk of victim-blaming attitudes. Further, the qualitative research project revealed some blind spots and described how certain work practices can turn into punitive measures with negative effects on women and children. Together with the results from international research, a discussion on protective elements will be facilitated.

This article focuses on strategies for child protection social workers to prevent victim-blaming attitudes. Consequently, approaches to improve the quality of child protection social services will be discussed and specific methods and techniques examined from different points of view. The article therefore attempts to contribute to discussions of this very important and widespread social issue, combining practical experience with broader theoretical considerations.

DEFINITION OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

First we should clarify the key concepts and terms used to ensure a uniform interpretation and understanding of the results and implications discussed in the article. It is vital for readers to have an accurate understanding of the meanings of the concepts explained below to ensure the greater insight and knowledge required, at least as a basis for further discussion.

Gender-based violence against women

The terminology used when talking about violence against women is not standardized and different words are used to describe the same phenomenon, although the meanings of the related words are not identical. I examined the different terms used and attempted to grasp the different nuances of meaning attributed to the different terms used to describe this social issue, such as violence against women, intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, etc. I also compared the main terms used in Italian and German, such as maltrattamento in famiglia, violenza contro le donne,

häusliche Gewalt, Gewalt an Frauen, etc. I found both advantages and drawbacks to these different terms used to describe a complex issue. This extensive reflection on the different terms used, and especially the contribution by Dr. Barbara Tardón Recio at the WAVE[2] conference in 2014, has helped me to choose a terminology which incorporates all the elements I perceive as essential. "Gender-based violence against women" did not obscure the main characteristics of violence in relationships behind an alleged "neutrality", as is the case of "domestic violence" or "maltrattamento in famiglia". "Intimate partner violence" largely refers to violence against women. I therefore deemed it impossible to avoid using the word "women" or substitute this with "partner" or "family". Furthermore, this violence occurs on various levels and the main reasons for the high numbers are linked to the patriarchal value system used to organise societies and the role of women therein. The frequency of violence against women in relationships can be only explained by analysing the social system, which assigns a value to women as inferior and therefore disadvantaged because of their gender. This explains the importance of the "gender-based" part of the term and brought me to the conclusion that "gender-based violence against women" is the clearest term I could find to describe the social phenomenon I wanted to investigate.

Secondary victimization

"Secondary victimization" is a concept related to criminology and describes different states a person may go through if she or he experiences a potentially life-threatening situation (Campell, Raja, 2005; von Mayenburg, 2009). Transferred to gender-based violence against women this means that primary victimization occurs at the time the violence per se occurs, in those cases where the woman is the victim of the situation. She is exposed to the violence carried out by the perpetrator and attempts to protect her life in different ways. On the other hand, secondary victimization occurs later, at the time when the woman decides to talk about her experiences of violence, this being a highly sensitive moment and often decisive in terms of future directions and decisions. The woman is in a highly vulnerable situation and extremely sensitive to the responses she gets. Her interlocutor's reactions play a crucial role, even more so when this person is in an important or powerful position, such as a child protection social worker. If the reactions of the interlocutor blame the woman by shifting the responsibility for the violence from the perpetrator to her, she might feel, once again, like the victim of a situation from which she cannot escape. Her attempt to be heard or helped has failed, leading to feelings of guilt and shame. There is also a third phase of victimization, called "tertiary victimization". This describes the time when the woman alters her perception of herself and accepts her victim status as part of her identity. This alteration in her self-concept can have several negative consequences for her life and it is much more difficult to reverse. However, this article concentrates on the dynamics of secondary victimization because handling such situations with greater awareness can provide survivors of gender-based violence with considerable and sustainable support.

Survivors of gender-based violence

Although I use the term "secondary victimization" to describe the specific dynamics of this phenomenon, I decided to avoid labelling women with the term "victim". My practical experiences over 10 years as a social worker at a women's shelter have taught me a lot about the power of words and especially how labelling someone a "victim" can result in critical judgment. On the other hand, labelling a woman as a "survivor" can help her to retain a positive attitude, as it implies she has done something to survive violence, often for several years. Furthermore, the term "survivor" is not merely useful to avoid a negative label but actually provides a more accurate idea of what the woman and her children have gone through. Every woman who has survived gender-based violence, frequently for several years, has developed certain essential survival strategies that can

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[2] For further information about the conference and network see: www.wave-network.org

often only be understood by exploring the specific dynamics of the relationship. For these reasons, hereinafter I will use the term "survivor" when talking about women and children.

CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Just as social work practice does not happen in an empty space, similarly research on social work practice and the discussions on theories, methods and techniques cannot take place without consideration of the impact of the society in which it is happening. In order to enable the readers to have a complex comprehension of the results and the further discussions, it is important to embed the article in a broader context.

An essential aspect in achieving this goal was to reflect further on the system of the society where the research took place taking a broader on look on international debates. International research shows that problematic relations between child protection social workers and mothers surviving gender-based violence are widespread and global (Freymond, 2003; Bourassa et al., 2008; Lapierre, 2008; Melchiorre, Vis, 2013); in the USA (Johnson, Sullivan, 2008; Lapierre, Côté, 2011); in Australia (Cooley, Frazer, 2006); and in Europe (Crawford, Liebling-Kalifani, Hill, 2009; Keeling, Wormer, 2012; Gracia, 2014). The impression given is that, a parallel could be made between the similarities dynamics of gender-based violence have throughout societies based on patriarchal values, and the problematic responses of child protection social workers.

On that basis, I focused on a common feature shared by the societies in question, which I found in their patriarchal system. Without denying the differences to be found within these societies and being aware of the risk of oversimplification, some essential common elements can be observed which allow us to classify a society as "patriarchal". According the critical theory of patriarchy (von Werlhof, 2009), a patriarchal society can be described as being *"characterized by war, state formation and reign as system, religion (esp. monotheism), the subjugation of women and their culture, hierarchically arranged social classes, exploitation, generational conflicts and environmental problems"* (FIPAZ, 2019:online; translated by the author).

Furthermore, patriarchal society is also characterized by three pillars which depend on and interact with each other. Essentially, these are androcentrism, anthropocentrism and mental and global imperialism. Androcentrism refers to the idea of men as the ideal for human beings as only they have a clear mind which enables them to think rationally and logically. On the other hand, women are linked to nature and defined as emotionally weak and missing the key abilities to make reasonable decisions. This point of view is strongly linked to the concept of anthropocentrism, which is fundamentally the belief that human beings (i.e. men) represent the peak of creation and, adding a hierarchical logic to this concept, human beings are therefore allowed to dominate nature. Consequently, women also have to be dominated by men because they are linked to nature and seen as incomplete. In addition to these two pillars of every patriarchal society is the missionary approach; i.e. mental and global imperialism or the belief that they, and only they, possess the real truth. That is why patriarchal societies tend to conquer and suppress other societies by adopting an imperialist attitude. (von Werlhof, 2009; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011; Federici, 2015).

The findings of modern matriarchal studies (Göttner-Abendroth, 2009) and critical theory of patriarchy (von Werlhof, 2009) have helped me to understand the hidden powers and dynamics of patriarchal societies. Since Italian society can also be described as patriarchal, a critical analysis of the underlying value system was essential in order to understand the narratives. The analytical perspective gained from these theoretical concepts supported my analyses of the relations between child protection social workers and women surviving gender-based violence (Strasser, 2001; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011; Keeling, Wormer, 2012; Shqungin, Allen, Loomis, et al. 2012; Federici, 2015; Tazi-Preve, 2017).

Child protection social work

Child protection social services often refer to the convention of the right of the child (Un General Assembly, 1989) when they start to describe their field. We can summarize that the focus is to protect children from abuse, neglect, and harm, and to support them to further improve their rights of having a family, education and a healthy development. The implementation of these goals represents a huge challenge for child protection social workers because families can be described as a multidimensional and complex system with different demands and needs. A singular child protection social worker can hardly handle all of these various aspects and the possible multitude problems. Therefore, an increasing importance is given to a strong professional network with experts from different areas.

In this respect, it should be pointed out that the present paper focusses on one specific aspect of child protection social work, which is the issue of gender-based-violence and the correlated risk of secondary victimization. This does not mean that in those families where gender-based-violence occurs, there might not also exist further issues and problems relevant to secure the wellbeing of the children. However, recently it has become a matter of common knowledge that the effects of witnessing violence for children are similar to those of direct violent experiences (Cooley, Frazer, 2006; Johnson, Sullivan 2008). Consequently, also the demand of specific knowledge on the dynamics of gender-based violence for child protection social workers increased reciprocally.

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Although this article focuses on implications and the development of supportive methods and techniques for child protection social work practices, I would like to provide a short overview of relevant international research as well as on the research project on which it is based. The Canadian study of Bourassa et.al (2008) showed that child protection social workers often consider gender-based violence as out of their mandate. Consequently, their interventions are very diverse, as they have no clear guidelines. The focus of the study of Johnson and Sullivan (2008) was on practices in child protection social services. The researchers describe how patriarchal stereotypes influence the interventions of child protection social workers and may lead to hold mothers responsible for the actions of the perpetrators. The results articulated by Keeling and Wormer (2012) are similar. The researchers describe the practices of child protection social workers and illustrate how certain interventions recapitulate the perpetrators' behavior.

The starting point for my qualitative research project (Fleckinger, 2017) were ten years of practical experience as a social worker at a women's shelter, where I had to mediate several times the difficult relationship between child protection social workers and mothers seeking help. The qualitative study tried to get a deep understanding of this often difficult relationship. A feminist methodology was chosen with the aim to overcome possible androcentric and/or anthropocentric assumptions often linked to discussions on gender-based violence. I started with a preliminary field study combining several informal exchanges with my colleagues (staff members from women's shelters) with more structured interviews with a colleague and two women who had survived gender-based violence and had been blamed for it by their child protection social workers. Based on the results from this preliminary research the interviews with child protections social workers were structured. The main area of interest for my research was to understand, through the accounts of child protection social workers, the risk of secondary victimization for mothers who had survived gender-based violence and, if possible, to isolate examples of best practice.

The study involved a purposeful sample of seven child protection social workers who were ready to be interviewed and gave their written, informed consent. The problem-centred guided interviews (Schmidt-Grunert, 2004) with child protection social workers were divided into two parts. The first part consisted of questions about the individual background of the child protection social worker. The second part started with a case study, a vignette of a fictitious family situation where the child protection social worker might encounter in their work. The interviews were highly

productive and could be analysed from different perspectives by adopting an inductive approach. Significant for this paper is that further investigation showed that the occurrence of secondary victimization can be linked, primarily, to two factors: the expectations regarding motherhood and the expectations regarding the victims or survivors. Survivors of gender-based violence therefore have to deal with a twofold risk of secondary victimization. Below I will illustrate how these two risk factors can be observed in practice.

Before starting with the discussion on the implications for the practices of child protection social work, it is important to map out the working conditions of the child protection social workers who participated in the research (Fleckinger, 2017). Regarding the interviews, all social workers described their workload as too heavy. Working 38 hours a week, they have often to deal with 42 families. One child protection social worker described this pressure in their daily work routine as a nearly impossible task *"we can't do it… there are more and more cases… we act like firefighters"* (child protection social worker (CPSW) B). Another child protection social worker regrets the fact that *"there's no time to focus on the positive aspects and to promote and strengthen them"* (CPSW C). It is important to bear in mind these working conditions since most of the views provided by the women and colleagues interviewed in the preliminary research are not particularly positive.

I would also like to stress that this comprehension of the working conditions of child protection social workers should not be seen as an excuse or justification for victim-blaming attitudes but rather it should be seen as a necessary element to develop a deep understanding of the complexity of such situations. It is crucial to understand that working with survivors of gender-based violence requires being emotionally available, and there is a great need for time to reflect.
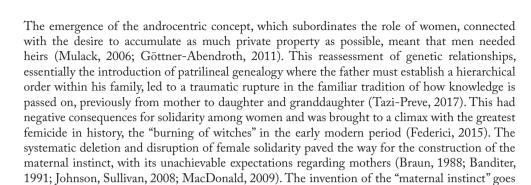
One interesting consequence of the lack of time can also be observed by the number of families related to gender-based violence that child protection social workers have to deal with. The child protection social workers interviewed stated that cases were assigned at random, without following any classification system. Conversely, the data analysis showed a difference between the child protection social workers working fewer hours a week and those working more hours a week. Those who work fewer hours deal with more families where gender-based violence occurs (averaging 37.69% of the families) than those who work more hours a week (averaging 8.76% of the families). Moreover, professional experience also tended to increase the proportion of families where gender-based violence occurs in a social worker's workload. Given the small number of child protection social workers interviewed, it is not possible to make a universally valid statement. Nevertheless, the impression is that working fewer hours a week might have a positive effect on the quality of the work, enhancing the child protection social worker's assessment skills. Additionally, greater professional experience might also improve the quality of the case history recorded, given the often hidden dynamics of gender-based violence.

THE GOOD MOTHER

Starting with the concept of a good mother, it is necessary to focus briefly on the ideal of motherhood and how this is reified in our society. Generally, it is important to bear in mind the fact that there are no fixed aspects that represent a good mother. On the contrary, the image of motherhood varies in accordance with the socio-cultural changes and accepted values in society (Banditer, 1991; Macdonald, 2009; Federici, 2015). As mentioned before, the common feature observed in the societies in question is their patriarchal social system. That is why it was important for me to understand the image of motherhood within the patriarchal order. In brief, we should note the importance of the big changes in values and in the economic and familiar system occurring during the shift from an egalitarian society towards a patriarchal one (Göttner-Abendroth, 2011). Although this article cannot hope to describe such changes with the necessary precision and complexity, I would like to review the most significant and then concentrate more on today's expectations regarding motherhood.

The emergence of the androcentric concept, which subordinates the role of women, connected with the desire to accumulate as much private property as possible, meant that men needed heirs (Mulack, 2006; Göttner-Abendroth, 2011). This reassessment of genetic relationships, essentially the introduction of patrilineal genealogy where the father must establish a hierarchical order within his family, led to a traumatic rupture in the familiar tradition of how knowledge is passed on, previously from mother to daughter and granddaughter (Tazi-Preve, 2017). This had negative consequences for solidarity among women and was brought to a climax with the greatest femicide in history, the "burning of witches" in the early modern period (Federici, 2015). The systematic deletion and disruption of female solidarity paved the way for the construction of the maternal instinct, with its unachievable expectations regarding mothers (Braun, 1988; Banditer, 1991; Johnson, Sullivan, 2008; MacDonald, 2009). The invention of the "maternal instinct" goes back to Rousseau, was later complemented by Freud, and describes the ideal of the all-sacrificing mother, the all-knowing mother and the nurturing mother/breadwinning father (Braun, 1988; Macdonald, 2009).

The consequences of this ideological construct still influence motherhood, as well as the work of child protection social workers (Brown, 2006). As shown by interviews from international research, mothers are generally faced with higher expectations regarding their mothering capabilities than fathers (MacDonald, 2009; Tazi-Preve, 2017). Johnson and Sullivan (2008) showed how patriarchal ideologies are widespread in the response to domestic violence and how mothers are judged against the aforementioned stereotypes. In summary, these numerous and sometimes unachievable expectations regarding mothering are key to creating the deep sense of guilt accompanied with a general feeling of performing badly (Mulack, 2006; O'Reilly, 2016). Based on the accounts provided by the child protection social workers, colleagues and women interviewed, mothers are held more responsible for protecting their children. Furthermore, one often unconscious demand was for them to place the needs of their children before their own, whereas this was not expected from the father/perpetrator. In fact, one aspect of being a "good mother" was the willingness and ability of the mother/survivor to convince the child/survivor to visit the father/perpetrator. Mothers who refuse to trust the perpetrator risk being accused of turning their children against the father (Strasser, 2001; Kavemann, Kreyssig, 2013).

The following case examples show how the higher expectations regarding mothers can turn into mother blaming attitudes, which exonerate the perpetrator. This very subtle shift of responsibility occurs often, as for example one child protection social worker talked about a woman who was uncertain if she should return to her man/perpetrator or not. In this situation, the child protection social worker explained to her very clearly that if she returns to the perpetrator she will put her children at risk. Further, the child protection social worker added the threat that in this case she will ask the judge for support to ban the woman from return to her home. Contemporaneously, the actor of the violence is ignored, as for instance, a possible restraining order was not discussed. In international research, these attitudes of mother-blaming are called "the invisible man syndrome" (Humphreys, 2008; Lapierre, 2008) and describe how the woman becomes solely responsible for the situation, as she puts her children at risk.

Similar are also the remarks of another child protection social worker, who reported from a case where she clearly told to the mother that her child could not live anymore in this constant situation of violence and indecision of the mother. She stated clearly *"…either you take a decision quickly, or the services will do so…."* (CPSW D). The child protection social worker explained further that the perpetrator was not confronted with a similar demand. These examples show clearly the higher standards of child protection expected from mothers.

Further, this indicate the complexity of the situations and the limited scopes of actions for child protections social workers. A clear confrontation with the perpetrators can hardly ever take place because during a violent relationship the violence against women and children could even increase. Similar attention has to be given to the moment when the woman attempts to leave. The moments

of separation correlate often with an escalation of violence as the high numbers of feminicide show. (Johnson, Sullivan, 2008; Casa delle donne per non subire violenza ONLUS Bologna, 2018).

THE GOOD VICTIM

I would like to start this paragraph with an example from the interviews which illustrates how important it can be to correspond to the ideal of the good victim. A child protection social worker described a woman very positively with the following words: *"the mother is a very able person… you give her a task and she fulfils it!"* (CPSW D). The child protection social worker also described some relevant case details. One year previously, the woman had asked for help as she was experiencing violence from her husband. The child protection social worker helped her to get a place at a women's shelter with her child, and she was still helping her to reorganize her life in an independent apartment. Some minutes after this comment, the same child protection social worker talked about another case where, according to her opinion, she had made a mistake. The situation was quite similar, namely a woman coming to the child protection social worker to ask her for help to get out of a violent situation. Once again, the child protection social worker helped the woman to find a safe place at a women's shelter with her child. The social worker then explained that, apart from the woman's accounts of physical and psychological violence, one time she had also witnessed, for herself and in her office, the man making death threats to the woman: *"if you leave me, I'll kill you and cut you into pieces"* (CPSW D). Regardless of this direct experience of violence, the child protection social worker now interpreted her support for the woman as a mistake. She argued that, after living with her child for just six months at a women's shelter, this woman had built up her life again in a new apartment, managing the father-child contact independently, without negotiating them first with her. *"You're left with the feeling… was the violence real or was it actually invented by the woman?"* (CPSW D). According to the social worker, the account of violence told by the woman was more related to a strategy to get a place at a women's shelter.

The impression given is that, although the violence has been witnessed directly by the child protection social worker, this is not enough to credit the woman's account completely. In fact, once the woman no longer matches the ideal of a passive victim and organizes her own life without negotiating this beforehand with her social worker, the latter also withdraws their support, further reinforcing the perception of the perpetrator. Besides withdrawing support, the child protection social worker even redefines the situation, calling into question the violence that had been clearly identified previously by undermining the woman's credibility. As the interviews show, this is not an individual case. In fact, similar reactions could also be observed in the accounts by colleagues, women and child protection social workers. This fact encourages a critical consideration of how empowerment works in social work practices and poses the question of how important it is for child protection social workers to keep their control over the people they are working with. As David Watson states *"it (empowerment) becomes an activity that managers do to workers and practitioners to clients"… "this model of empowerment clearly allows the powerful to maintain control of the process"* (Watson, 2002).

This risk of losing credibility increases in line with the element of innocence. As international research shows, the axiom of an innocent victim who is unable to take action sometimes leads to misinterpretations of the survival strategies and is used as a basic argument to withhold support from survivors (Moser, 2007; Kavemann, Kreyssig, 2013). To give an example, some women were aware that episodes of physical violence formed part of the specific violent relationship they had. That is why women sometimes contribute actively to the proverbial "straw that broke the camel's back", maybe while the children are at school. At first sight this behaviour seems hard to understand, but we may begin to understand it on closer inspection. On the one hand, the woman feels that she is partly in control of a situation which, most of the time, she perceives as

hopeless and, on the other hand, this is also a strategy to protect her children. For non-experts, such actions are quickly interpreted as "something she wanted" and lead to a sceptical attitude, conversely strengthening the perpetrator (Moser, 2007).

HOW CAN THE DYNAMICS OF SECONDARY VICTIMIZATION BE PREVENTED?

In my view, one of the features of social work is a strong commitment to the importance of constant dialogue between theory and practice (Staub-Bernasconi, 2007). As a logical consequence, social work research should therefore be carried out within this constant interplay, which is indispensable for developing further theoretical concepts as well as practical methods. Against this background, my scientific work shall not be limited to merely collecting and analyzing experiences, but rather its findings should be used to improve child protection social work practices. By comparing my results with other research, interesting parallels could be found. The reflections on how to improve child protection social work practices refer particularly to the findings of Johnson and Sullivan (2008), Bourassa et al. (2008), Keeling and Wormer (2012) as well as Brown (2006) in conjunction to the results of my research. Hereafter I will discuss some ways in which more forward-looking methods and techniques might be introduced within social work practices to avoid the dynamics of secondary victimization. Based on the two major risk factors for secondary victimization discussed above, two almost indispensable working attitudes may be described.

A. Being a social worker does not automatically mean being an expert in gender-based violence protection.

At first glance, this statement sounds almost ridiculous and simplistic, although it describes one of the root causes of secondary victimization. As broadly shown by the interviews, child protection social workers did not automatically contact the specialized services when they suspected gender-based violence in a family. Neither did they call the experts in all those family situations where they knew for certain that the mother and children had experienced gender-based violence. On the contrary, as several accounts showed, some child protection social workers believe they are able to judge for themselves whether there is a violent or conflictive situation in a relationship. None of the child protection social workers in question talked about specific training or practical experiences as a basis for having developed such skills. For example, one child protection social worker described a family where gender-based violence was occurring, classifying the situation as highly complex. Furthermore, she explained that, in collaboration with other services, they had carried out a risk assessment regarding the violence and had decided to confront the perpetrator, although none of the aforementioned services have any specialization in handling situations of gender-based violence. Based on their decisions, the social worker was then puzzled by the survivor's unwillingness to confront the perpetrator and subsequently interpreted the survivor's behaviour as a refusal to cooperate.

As international research shows, these often apparently contradictory behaviours by survivors mask elaborate strategies that help them to survive (Moser, 2007). It is therefore essential for practitioners to have extensive knowledge of the often hidden dynamics of power beyond any particular episodes of violence, in order to understand the dynamics behind this.

I would like to emphasize the complexity of this abusive system, starting with the legal framework in force, in which gender-based violence is defined as "… *a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men… violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women*

are forced into a subordinate position compared with men…" (Council of Europe, 2011:1)[3]. As there are many different factors to this phenomenon, it would be short-sighted or even negligent to ignore the fact that specific theoretical as well as practical knowledge is essential in order to deal with this issue.

Another example comes from the account provided by one of the women interviewed in the preliminary research. She talked about her situation as mother of one child and about the violence she had experienced. Although she had not lived with her ex-husband/perpetrator for 3 years, she was still in contact with the child protection social services to manage the father-child contact. She gave several examples of how her ex-husband still tried to control her life and the pressure she had to handle. In short, the ongoing psychological violence, as well as economic violence, became evident from her account. However, she had not found a way to communicate these other kinds of violence to her social worker *"…she (child protection social worker) understood it (the violence) only as slaps…"* (Women (W) 2). Rather, as she tearfully told me, in the presence of her ex-husband/perpetrator the child protection social worker had said to her that *"… what had happened was my fault and I should forget about the matter once and for all…"* (W2). The woman felt humiliated and ashamed while her ex-husband/perpetrator, only a few seconds after the meeting, said to her *"…you see? No-one believes you!"* (W2). Through this statement, the ex-husband/perpetrator re-established his power over the woman and child, making use of the support provided by the child protection social worker. Meanwhile, the woman felt trapped in a situation with no way out.

Conflict or violence

The aim of this section is to explore further the importance of a clear case record, followed by a correct interpretation of the accounts given by family members. Depending on how a child protection social worker comes into contact with the family, he or she might be faced with the challenge of deciding whether the situation is one of violence or conflict. This clear distinction is essential for all the later phases in the whole process. Only by knowing the specific subjects and issues of the family can a child protection social worker detect the needs on which any further intervention should be based.

More specifically, mediation is often a very powerful and helpful way to overcome family conflict, although mediation is not recommended and even prohibited in situations of gender-based violence, as shown by Article 48 (1) of the European convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence: *"Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to prohibit mandatory alternative dispute resolution processes, including mediation and conciliation, in relation to all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention"* (2011).

An analysis of the interviews reveals considerable variety in this respect. More than half the child protection social workers interviewed use mediation in family situations they openly describe as characterized by gender-based violence. Consequently, we might therefore assume that child protection social workers sometimes ignore the law. Fully aware as I am of how harsh this statement might seem, some further considerations should be noted. Throughout the interviews, I could not clearly detect whether the child protection social workers knew about this relatively recent law, in force in Italy since 2014. On the other hand, all the child protection social workers interviewed showed themselves to be very interested in supporting survivors. Therefore, according to my understanding, it is more likely that these results have uncovered an insufficient awareness of the importance of a clear distinction between conflict and violence rather than any conscious violation of the law.

Such lack of expertise should not be used as an excuse, but it should be seen as a blind spot and be used as a starting point for further discussion and practical training. Moreover, I would like to

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[3] The convention of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence I refer to here has now been signed and ratified by at least 33 European countries.

emphasize that, independently of the knowledge of the child protection social workers in question, this does not minimize the risk of negative consequences for the survivors (Kavemann, Kreyssig, 2013). Consequently, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph and due to the complex nature of gender-based violence, we cannot assume that each child protection social worker has the expertise to accurately determine whether a certain situation is violent or not. Neither is it realistic to demand that each child protection social worker should attend specific training. It is more feasible to build up a strong network between services that encourages continuous exchange, even or particularly at the stage of case records.

B. There is no such thing as a neutral position

During the interviews, I continuously came across the concept of neutrality. Child protection social workers often aspire to maintain a neutral position in order to ensure the preferred objective assessment of the situation they have to deal with. This quite understandable attitude, probably valid in many different working situations, must nevertheless be rejected in situations of gender-based violence (Herman, 2006; Kavemann, Kreyssig, 2013). Following the first essential step of a clear case record, as described above, each child protection social worker should realise that there is no such thing as a neutral position. Quite the opposite, as maintaining a supposedly neutral position in situations of gender-based violence could result in secondary victimization. As shown by international research, victim protection can succeed if the professionals in charge stand in solidarity with the survivors (Johnson, Sullivan, 2008). In order to understand this important step, it is essential to understand the complex dynamics of gender-based violence.

Generally, in all situations of interpersonal violence, it is impossible to be a neutral observer, because the perpetrator demands passivity. Whenever witnesses look away, avoid talking about it or acting on it, the perpetrators reinforce their dominant position. They believe that it is not necessary to change their behaviour but rather that this is tolerated or even justified (Herman, 2006). As the aforementioned example showed, a witness minimizing or denying violent episodes or blaming the survivors always justifies violent behaviour. Special attention should therefore be given to the reactions and actions of child protection social workers at such moments because the negative consequences for survivors increase in proportion to the social worker's powerful position as a civil servant.

On the other hand, when an interlocutor listens to survivors, gives them advice and shows empathy, automatically they take up an action position of trying to protect the survivors. Every kind of support, no matter how small, implies the interlocutor believes the survivor and holds the perpetrator accountable for the violence. Regardless of whether this position is open or not, this represents an important step towards effective survivor protection and means that, if I want to protect a survivor, I must first give up my neutral position (Johnson, Sullivan, 2008; Herman, 2006).

Further protective elements

From the interviews and based on the findings of international research, it was possible to identify more examples of best practices. In contrast to the two indispensable working attitudes discussed earlier, these practices do not follow any chronological or hierarchical order; neither should they be blindly followed in each particular situation of gender-based violence.

The protective practices identified (Cooley, Frazer, 2006; Johnson, Sullivan, 2008; Kavemann, Kreyssig, 2013) are:

a)   Believe the mother's account
b)   Confront the perpetrator, and hold him responsible for his actions
c)   Offer support and information about specific services
d)   Protect the survivors from harassment from the perpetrator's relatives
e)   Offer encouragement

f) Testify in court on the dynamics of abuse
g) Provide information on the processes and expectations

As shown by the accounts provided by some child protection social workers, these practices already form part of their approach to some extent. By way of example, one child protection social worker stated clearly that she always focuses on the woman and tries to understand her issues and needs. The child protection social worker also explained how important this is *"if the woman is at risk of even more violence... you can't just walk into the family like a tank"* (CPSW B). Other child protection social workers also emphasize the importance of giving information in order to show the woman the options open to her. One of the child protection social workers talked about a case in which she had to protect the survivors from harassment by the perpetrator's family: *"...my report should help to extend the restraining order to the perpetrator's whole family…"* (CPSW F).

Generally speaking, it is important for this list of best practices to form a theoretical background for each child protection social worker, but it is equally important for them to be tailored to the specific family situation in question. For example, sometimes it is not possible to confront the perpetrator and hold him responsible for his actions because the survivors might risk being exposed to even more violence. Furthermore, there are other situations in which, in order to protect the children, it is not always possible to believe everything the mother says, for instance in cases of co-dependence of the mother. This also applies when the children need to be placed with a foster family, a situation in which it might be important, for a period of time, to hold on to some information about the processes involved.

It is therefore crucial that the findings and implications for social work practices discussed in this article result in a greater awareness of the importance of specific training and strong network. However, this should not limit the discretionary powers of child protection social workers as these represent an essential element of good practice.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to throw light on a supposedly marginalized issue in child protection social work practices. It attempted to provide a critical discussion of some attitudes in child protection social work practices, uncovering some presumably blind spots. The paper illustrated that gender-based violence has a high prevalence in child protection social work services. Therefore, specific knowledge of child protection social workers is required as witnessing gender-based violence may provoke similar consequential harm to children as direct experiences of violence.

The article emphasised the similarities in international research and connected them to the risk of secondary victimization mothers who survived gender-based violence might face. The description of the two key factors: the expectations regarding motherhood and the expectations regarding the victims or survivors opened the discussion on implementations for child protection social work practices. Further, the article described some key elements, based on empirical data, which may help to prevent dynamics of secondary victimization. These elements can now be used to enrich theoretical discussions and to help formulate methods and techniques for the daily working practices in child protection social services.

The research has also highlighted several questions that have not been sufficiently answered as yet. More research is therefore required to explore further the various aspects of this phenomenon. In short, it should not be forgotten that gender-based violence against women is a complex issue for which there is no simple or universal solution. The responses can never be simplistic but must be tailored to the various needs of the survivors in order to ensure a safe environment for the children without blaming the mothers. Contemporaneously, the working conditions of child protection social workers should not be forgotten. As described beforehand the pressures in the daily working routine of child protection social workers restrict constantly a broader support of the families.

It has to be added, that discussing dynamics of secondary victimization does not mean to imply a victim-perpetrator dichotomy. There is no argument saying that there are not families where gender-based violence occurs and where the mother might also abuse or neglect her children. Despite this fact, the implications for child protection social work practice discussed above are still valid, but in certain cases, they must be accompanied by additional measures in order to protect the children. This emphasises also that child protection social workers are frequently confronted with multi problem family situations, which need complex responses and specific support.

To conclude, I wish to note that, without the frankness of my interviewees, this research would not have been possible. It certainly represented a big step for the women interviewed to share their stories; but it was also a big step for the child protection social workers to talk so openly about so many details of their working practices, and this cannot be taken for granted. For example, in a similar Canadian study, the researchers did not find such willingness to cooperate as I did (Bourassa et al., 2008). I am therefore very pleased to have been given this opportunity, of being supported in my focus on improving the quality of the methods and techniques applied by child protection social services.

I hope that this article contributes insights and underline the challenges facing child protection social workers, as well as highlighting the sensitive nature of child protection. In conclusion, I would like to stress the utmost importance of time, a constant dialogue between the different services, and a strong network.

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