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REPORT,
WORK STREAM IV
Part II

The girls' perspectives

- Youth Meeting at Burg Schwaneck, 13 – 15 June 2014



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INTRODUCTION

As part of the EU co-funded project “Girls Using Violence – Intervention and Prevention”, an international youth meeting was held in Munich June 2014. The purpose of the meeting was multifaceted, but the main objective was to get the girl’s own perspectives – to hear their voice. During the weekend in Munich, the focus was on discussing successful and less successful measures of intervention and prevention in cases of girl’s use of violence.

The 15 girls who participated at the meeting came from seven different European countries, and the participation criteria was that they had a past with use of physical violence and that they had been through some kind of intervention/measure to cope with their aggression challenges. The girls were accompanied by a youth worker/practitioner they already had a relation to (from here on referred to as “key workers”). Project partners from all of the partner countries also participated; partially partaking in the activities of the weekend and partly working parallel with other project related tasks. In all, the meeting had 46 participants, respectively from England (London), Wales (Swansea), Germany (Munich), Norway (Oslo), Spain (Alicante), Sweden (Gothenburg) and Poland (Warsaw).

Burg Schwaneck is a castle like youth hostel, located in the outskirts of Munich in a suburb called Pullach. The place is hardly urbanized and offers an adequate setting for concentrated work without much distraction in quiet surroundings near the river Isar.

We focused on the young women’s experiences with different measures preventing or intervening use of violence. The young women’s view and experiences were central, as it was them who had opted for a life free of violence. In some cities it is a well-established practice to integrate young women (who has abandoned use of violence) into measures of violence-prevention, after going through a special training. For example in London, some NGO’s exclusively work with such former offenders. Swansea offers holistic and low threshold programs of violence-prevention and girls formerly using violence are asked to participate and qualify themselves.

Several of the key workers had a history of violence-use themselves, experiences they were able to contribute with. It was clear that not all of them had reached a developmental that was higher and the girls participating, while others acted in a highly professional and defined manner, regardless whether they had a history of violence use or not.

A goal this meeting was to reach a level of openness that enables an open view-exchange and intense reflection. Considering the limited time available this was quite an ambiguous goal, however the evaluation showed that overall, both the key workers, the project partners and the girls themselves were satisfied with both the methods used and the outcomes generated. The two central methods were the flow of life and SPOT-Analysis. To meet the demands of the situation as well as the needs of the girls, we embedded the central programme units into a program allowing them to get to know one another as well as times of leisure. This played a vital role and will be described in detail later in the report.

THE UNITS OF THE MEETING

Acquaintance and experience sharing

Unit: “International welcoming”



Photo: IMMA e.V., Munich

The participants move about freely in a room and greet one another in the way they are accustomed to at home.

Unit: “Cuddly toy race”



Photo: IMMA e.V., Munich

The group counts off, and is parted into 3 randomly internationally mixed groups. Each has a stuffed toy doing a race for them.

Method: “Scaling”



Photo: IMMA e.V., Munich

To help to get acquainted with one another, the participants line up according to various questions in the order of timescale, intensity et cetera. This method is suitable to start with the issue of violence on a low threshold level.

Method: “partner-interview”

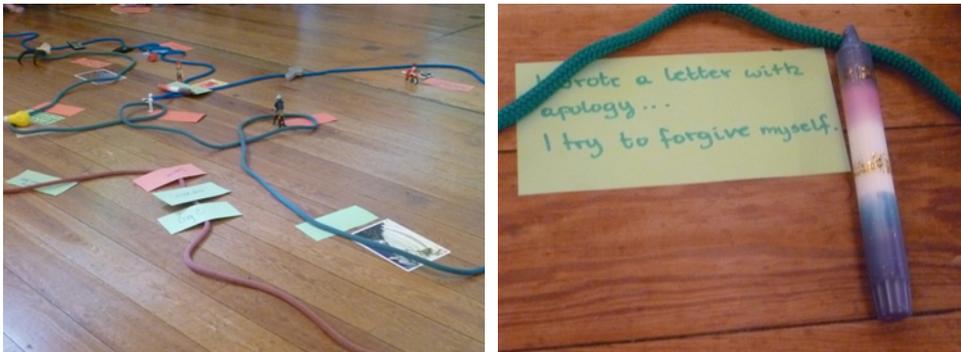


Photo: IMMA e.V., Munich

The partner-interview offers the chance to get to know a specific partner better. The two partners then introduce one another to the group. The photo shows two girls from England and Norway together with by their key-workers as translation-support.

Reflections on the girl’s own use of violence, interventions and their “turning point”

Method: “Flow of life”



Photos: IMMA e.V., Munich

The “flow of life” is a method from the systemic work theory. It allows an overview of own life events in form of spreading out a long rope. Aspects central to a specific issue can in this way be sensed and physically experienced.

All of the young women were given the same task. They had to pinpoint helpful and less helpful support-measures of prevention and intervention they had been through. The girls were asked to first focus on their own life, and then share their experiences with the group.

The girls were aware of their role as professionals in stopping violent behaviour. The aim was to identify measures that were transnationally effective, to make them available to other professionals working with young women using violence.

The task was to spread out a rope symbolising your own life and fastening an icon representing today. Then the girls went back into the past and labelled measures they went through. Next step was to return to the present and take an outlook into the future. At this point they were asked to discuss which support-measures they needed to keep from using violence again. Each intervention was marked with an icon and a short comment on a moderation card. Subsequently the girls were offered to present their “flow of life” to the audience. Several girls, as well as two key-workers, took the chance to illustrate how they had overcome their use of violence, and in this way contributing to the audience as a positive role model. Every one of these reviews was very touching and created an intense atmosphere.

The “flow of life” was performed in supervision: the girls were supported by their key worker. It was soon evident that both the girls and the key workers showed quite different stages of development in terms of violence use in their biography. Some had given more thought to what had been helpful and were able to give a clear account on that. This often was addressed to the key workers, how important they had been to the girls at the time. There was an overall notion that no matter from which country the girls came from, a close relationship to a person who supported them to stop using violence was crucial. Having a role model who is showing a clear cut position against violence in everyday life is probably vital, especially if the person of trust also has a history of violence. All girls, except from one, expressed that they were pleased with the method used. The girl that wasn't had arranged with her key worker to omit the rope and only use cards. Of course each participant was free to decide herself in which way she wanted to approach the subject. All of the girls attended the meeting on their own accord and while doing so they were challenged to explore and meet their personal limits. Initially all girls in the meeting had a strong urge to explain why they turned violent. We gave room to this although it was not the topic of focus at the time.

Explanations for acts of violence

The triggering incidents they reported were: lack of future-perspectives, friends using violence, experiences as victims of violence or traumatic events like the death of a sibling, domestic violence, frequently in combination with illegal drugs, alcohol, moving house frequently or often changing school, hanging out with “bad” people and problems in the

family, (especially with the mother and violence at home). Many of the girls reported that social workers and teachers did not notice their plight. One girl said: “The teacher saw me as a mistake”.

One girl believed that “pronouncing strong opinions” and “to have a big mouth” had been her problem. She described that she enjoyed the teachers, which led to a teacher referring her to a psychologist. In the same breath she said that she had had a relationship with a violent drug-dealing young man at the time. This illustrates how important a highly developed sense of empathy and sophisticated conversation techniques are. To enable the young people to move themselves and avoid them feeling urged, professionals also need a certain framework.

The girls themselves recognize drug consumption as a major problem. One girl described it as “living in a bubble”.

Using violence as relief from pressure was another example the girls stated. Some of them showed distinct signs of self-mutilating-behavior on their skin. Equally pressure-relief is a major issue in this context. Many of the girls described that measures that led to the girls being/feeling isolated (e.g. taken in custody or losing the feeling of cooperation) were perceived as boost for their own violent behavior. The girls clearly had an urge to show that there had been reasons for their acts of violence.

Being a victim was a justification shared by many of the girls. The way these stories were told highly reflected the various stages of development the girls presently showed.

Helpful measures

The girls identified the following measures: A letter of apology, linked to an effort of self-forgiving; therapy; units of training; talking to the key workers; to listen to other girls stories; Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) to gain more self-control and reflecting the violent incidents, partly in role play, in order to discern and break the own underlying patterns.

Having routines like fixed and regular meetings, a job, or contact to people in similar circumstances was also seen as helpful.

Often personal contact to a positive person was extremely important, regardless who it was, a teacher, social worker, friend, uncle, grandparent or mother. The girls mentioned all of these

persons, but the list certainly is not complete. It does however show that in principle anyone can serve as confident. A possible conclusion may be that working with the family as a whole with an aim to encourage positive and lasting relationships more effectively is important.

Partners were often mentioned to. However, we are skeptical to a love relationship or founding a family as solution in itself. The findings in the literature (as well as our own findings) show that young women often are a victim and an offender at the same time. There is a risk of the girls experiencing or using violence in a partnership again and violence is thereby continued as a problem solving strategy, maybe even passed on to the next generation.

We did notice that not all of the girls had their feet firmly on the ground of nonviolence. Unfortunately, not many partner institutions in the meeting have the capacity to stay in contact with the girls on a long term basis and keep up backing them after a measure has ended. These girls (as many people living with numerous constant risk factors in their lives) often have challenges with a lack of continuity in their support measures.

Another aspect the girls brought up was that, at some point, they had to take a firm and personal decision. For instance: "I told myself, I really want to live a better life!" To keep on going they also had to sense success and progress; "Things started going better." "Positive moments" are needed. Thus another leverage point in measures is to provide a framework for such is crucial. Similarly important for these girls is the realization of the wrong they did and suitable measures preparing the ground for this. "I realize what I did was wrong" was the crucial statement of one girl which helped her stop using violence.

Furthermore, the girls stated that helpful measures was to stop socializing with former friends who had had bad influence on them, to quit drug use, learning to value other people, getting an ok self-esteem and a basic respect for yourself.

Here, direct quotations from the girls are suitable:

"The persons who helped me change my life were: First of all my child keyworker, whom I would like to thank for teaching me how to value other persons to learn to know and love myself and who always backed me in good and in bad times. She used to cheer me up and give good advice. I have learned so much from her. Second my boyfriend, who showed me how to get what I want without having to treat others badly, to harm or hit. Because I received

true love from both of them they showed me what happiness is and how to stand on the ground with both feet. Both of them taught me to love my mother.”

“I read with my grandparents. I visited a center for minorities. Those were good times. My brother came with a letter from my mother. I spent time with my mother. My brother and I went to secondary school. I lived in a sheltered house, new friends, independence – a new start with my mother.”

Reconciling with the mother seems to play a central role for many girls. A girl told us in the “flow of life” that she had disappointed her mother deeply. Her mother had done everything for her. The mother would never be able to forgive the terrible things she and her sister had done. She also said she felt responsible for her sister to, as she was the elder one. Observing the girls body language during the “flow of life” clearly showed that working with the girls has to include working on reconciliation with their families. The pressure on the girls has to be lifted in order to avoid further casualties. Guilt and shame are not helpful, true empathy towards the all of the victims is.

Teambuilding

Activity: Rope course

In this unit the girls replenished energy for the evaluation on the next day and recover from the personal and exhausting work on the “flow of life”. A few girls preferred to stay at home and relax for themselves.



Photos: IMMA e.V., Munich



THE CURRENT SITUATION OF WORK WITH GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

Method: "Spot-analysis"



Photos: IMMA e.V., Munich

The second method that seemed suitable to assess the actual status quo in the field of prevention and intervention with girls and young women using violence was Spot-Analysis. All participants of the meeting in Munich were asked to express their views on the situation. The answers written on specifically colored moderation-cards were pinned onto flipcharts. In this way the answers could later be matched to the different groups of participants. To draw any country-specific conclusions was due to the complexity of the issue not possible.

The participants were asked to illustrate following four aspects of work with girls using violence. Following perspectives were possible:

1. The view of the young women formerly using violence on the brink of living without violence
2. The view of the key worker working with girls using violence
3. The view of the project partners

Quite a few attendants of the meeting were able to contribute with overlapping perspectives; 1) several key-workers had originally been using violence themselves and 2) most of the project partners had experiences working with girls using violence.

The feedback from the project partners is however not included in this report, since the focus is on the girls' perspectives.

The questions asked where:

Satisfactions: What are we proud of? What are we good at? What is going well?

Problems: What is obstructing us? What is difficult? What do we miss?

Opportunities: Which chances do we see for the future? What can we build upon?

Threats: Where are possible perils? Which unwanted changes could occur?

Which challenges await us?

Satisfactions

Responses from the girls

- Knowledge of their own power
- Working sincerely on their self-awareness
- The fact they even dared to look into the future
- The faith in their ability to “make it”

- Seeing their families and friends appreciate their efforts and progress gave them strength
- Gaining control over own life was another thing the girls were proud of. In practice, this was “minor” things like sticking to their daily routines, e.g. attending courses regularly
- Following a quote of a girl who knows she can truly be proud of herself: “I’m done with the past.”

Responses from the key workers

The key workers often stated that they were proud of getting/taking the chance to be a role model, watching their wards develop successfully and seeing that they could offer options through:

- The experiences they gather together and the understanding they are able to provide
- Team-work and cooperation with partners
- Their own belief, faith, wealth of experience, and their contacts and connections
- Sharing and contributing to the understanding of good practice and being a part of projects like this to gain international networks and relationships and share experience

One of the key workers was proud to tell that in the course of 4 years, not one of the girls in their district had been sent to jail.

Problems

Responses from the girls

A statement from a girl: “It is a big challenge to change to the better.”

- The girls recognized several major problems such as drug-use, personal faults, being incommunicative, not to be able to cope with the own feelings and to have difficulties accepting foreign point of views. This involves the problem not to be able to give others preference above oneself, and thus giving them more importance

- The fear of losing/missing out on things like courses, their flat, friends or support of the key worker
- Another challenge that many of the other girls faced was their relationship to other people, for example their family, their partners family, having “bad” friends, huge peer-groups exerting pressure, problems with their mother and a lack of security at home
- Some girls consider it problematic not to have enough NGO’s working in the field, which they would feel more comfortable talking to

Responses from the key workers

Many of the field workers expressed organizational/administrative challenges. They sadly expressed that they lacked both sufficient resources and time, seeing that so much time is spent specifically with the girls. Insufficient conditional framework was another aspect criticized, and a lack of governmental support. Another challenge faced by the key workers where age limits and diverging definitions of adolescence in different fields, especially concerning police and justice as well as varying responsibilities in the bureaucracy that consumed huge amounts of time.

The frustration connected to an inability to recognize the needs of the girls and to listen to their story as a whole, which they feared would lead to the girls not feeling appreciated/understood or feeling ignored.

- “Others wanted quick results”
- “Lack of cooperation with others”
- “If others have no flexible approach”
- “If persons talk, who don’t support”
- “Negative colleagues”
- “Lack of understanding, knowledge and support from others”
- “Decision takers who don’t appreciate the positive effects of our work with the young people”

Paramount is here the phrase “the others” without specifying who these others are. This suggests that a lot of mediation is needed to reach more satisfying conditions. As a culture of

mutual respect is required, it is necessary for all persons working in the field to learn to go for a walk in the others mind.

The quote “I have lost faith in myself” can advantageously be highlighted, not only because of how extraordinarily courageous and highly self-revealing it is to say something like that, but also as an intensifier to the impression that some key workers have to keep on working on themselves quite intensely in order to evade becoming a helpless helper.

Opportunities

Girls

The basic features the girls came forward with were access to education like school, employment training and higher education. Another opportunity is working with other girls who are in the same situation, and the girls say that telling their own story in different contexts has been very helpful. Many of them had had positive experiences with helping others; the possibility of helping and thus creating alternative options for the girls contributed to call their attention to schemes before they get into serious trouble. This gave the girls a sense of meaning, and the girls described themselves as mediators in these settings.

Their own strong points such as self-discipline, the ability to prioritize, inner strength, sensibility and the profound wish to change the own life were seen as advantageous. Other stabilizing points the girls referred to was therapy/work with a psychologist, having a job, doing sport and communication within the family. Further factors were positive circumstances as a good life, having no problems, and being a better person.

At an organisational level the girls wish for maintenance of the institutions that had been helpful to them, continuation and extension of the projects they are involved in.

Key-workers

The key-workers most often called for networking with other institutions and colleagues, as for expansion of the own institution. Funding in this sense is seen as chance to develop and extend the existing institutions and offers working with girls. Authentic and genuine partnership between NGO's as cooperation between institutions in general is a key issue.

Another thing that was mentioned was to increase the chances of the young people to travel and work, and for better payment of the trainees.

Personally the key workers see chances for themselves in the experiences they gather at a daily basis which increase their knowledge and understanding. Doing so they develop useful abilities like getting in contact, listen, to speak up, work hard and acting with consequences.

Threats

Responses from the girls

The threat most accounted for was drug use. Another was bad influence and a negative environment combined with own susceptibility to manipulation. Adverse influence factors were: violent fathers, social groups in general, gangs, “false” friends, the mother fails, fear to go astray again.

The general economic climate (thus the fear of losing the job) is also threats the girls feel.

Responses from the key workers

Lack of time and loss of funding was the biggest threat quoted. A result from this is amongst others insufficient personal resources. Due to certain arrangements funding of some projects is constantly short. These projects are threatened of closure and consequently precariousness of the associated jobs and youth services.

Structural challenges are especially feared when decision-takers don't know much about work at the grassroots level and it is hard to estimate which consequences corresponding decisions would have. In this context some plans to reorganize and fuse districts in several countries are seen as threat. Management is perceived as too focused on quick results, not appreciative, inflexible and not interested in exiting developments or interim findings. Thus the need for increased communication between the different levels is necessary. All the same some key-workers fear that understanding will rather decrease in time.

Frequently changing staff, followed by lack of relationship, of knowledge, expertise and candidness are other problems key-workers refer to.

The key persons described a drastic lack of supervision, especially in challenging situations where positive results and achievements are neglected. This is combined with the feeling of

living in a rat race with overwhelming workload, lack of support and insufficient pay. In this context age limits for provisions and a negative attitude of the personnel were mentioned. Seeing all this, being burnout seems inevitable over time.

General difficulties for the individual way of dealing with the tasks in social work were voiced to e.g. to keep a healthy distance from work and not to let it become part of private life.

Other adverse influences stated were absent “bad” fathers, racism, alcohol, inequality, poverty and negative masculine influence.

Evaluation

Method “tree in three levels”



Photo: IMMA e.V., Munich

The girls were asked to reflect on the weekend.

Red cards in the treetop stand for positive things, the stem with orange card for indifferent comments and in the base yellow cards were put to highlight what the girls thought was critique worthy. Naturally, all of the girls appreciated that their issue was taken really seriously and loved meeting so many girls with a similar story to them. Some were surprised

to see that similar violence-problems existed in other countries. For instance, the girls from London could hardly believe that violence existed in Munich. Many girls expressed that they wished that they had much more time than what's available during only one weekend.

To our surprise one of the major points of criticism concerned food (maybe an intercultural problem). The place of the meeting and the meeting itself were highly praised and the main consent was to repeat similar meetings.

SUMMARY

The original goal of the meeting was to get feedback from the girls on which concrete measures had been helpful in the process of stop using violence. The girls present in Munich once again showed that the best trainings and methods are only as good as the structural framework they are placed in, and the persons presenting them. At the same time, a variety of methods and approaches are in use, and the key persons expressed a frustration of not having sufficient tools and training to reach and work with girls and violence sufficiently. The girls also expressed varied experiences with measures and their effect. A toolbox of successful measures should be developed and made available to practitioners across the different levels and countries in order to make good practice available to all professionals working in the field of girls and violence.

On a broad level, many of the experiences and thoughts shared by the girls in Munich mirror findings in contemporary literature on the subject. For one, the crucial role of the key workers was underlined throughout the weekend. This was often accompanied with a feeling of not being supported or understood, and that the girl's family situation was crucial for their well being. From this, it is possible to argue that supporting/strengthening the capacity of the parents/caregivers in the family is important in order to help them perform their care function better. This supports the assumption that family systems should be treated as a whole in order to insure that all participants on all levels work together for the benefit of the children.

Another result of this weekend is that relations between decision-takers, workers on the grass-root-level and mediator have to intensify, in order to create measures that are more effective, fit all sizes and provide a satisfying work-basis. It is evident that in search of measures working well for the girls, all persons concerned in the process of finding and performing measures have to be involved.

The differences of welfare systems and structures between the participating countries might be considerable; whilst the similarities amongst the girls are striking. All girls for instance had an incredible ability to make contact across the language barriers. Naturally they were concerned with a common issue and were affected in a similar way. The readiness to share experiences and to reveal very personal information was immense. Therefore we owe special thanks to those who were central for us this weekend.

Many thanks to all girls and young women who are in the process to quit using violence for good who were as kind as to let us participate in the process.