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The significance of affective social relationships in preventing gender-based violence

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Violence against women[1] (VAW) is a reality affecting many young women and girls today in Europe and across the world. The Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) survey on VAW distributed among 42000 women found that 33% have experienced physical or sexual violence before they turn 15 (FRA, 2014). Consistently, UNICEF (2014) reports that more than 120 million girls worldwide (more than 1 in 10) have experienced forced intercourse or other sexual acts at some point in their lives. In 14 of the surveyed countries, at least 1 in 5 girls who reported at least one incident of sexual violence said it occurred for the first time between the ages of 10 and 14. These figures unveil an alarming reality: victims of VAW are increasingly younger, and the spaces where these violent acts occur are widespread, surrounding many girls' lives. The creation of communities free of gender violence is urgent and necessary in order to guarantee the proper fulfilment of basic rights. Previous studies have already shown that a preventive socialization model based on zero violence from zero years (0 from 0) - which rejects any sort of violence (Mayes and Cohen, 2002) from the very early years - is evidencing promising effects to reduce violence rates during children's whole life, and therefore improving quality of education (Rios-Gonzalez, Puigvert, Sanvicen and Aubert, 2019; European Commission, 2011).

The current scope of VAW requires rigorous scientific analyses that contribute to clarify what matters in its eradication. This is especially important as non-scientific

[1] Based on the definition provided by Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (VAW), in this article by Violence against Women is understood any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women. It also includes threats and coercion and can occur in public or in private life, also in educational institutions. From now on, VAW will be used to refer to this phenomenon.

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discourses are widespread among communities, families and professionals, leading to a process of naturalization and tolerance of violence, damning many of our children and youth to live with violence as an embedded part of their lives.

Research shows that permissive attitudes from early childhood to adulthood can lead to a socialization in which violence and VAW are normalized, with serious and devastating long-term consequences (Ostroy et al., 2009). Thus, it is not only the naturalization of violence within communities, families and/or schools that is significant, but also the ignorance of any gendered connotation of these acts when they occur. In this field of knowledge, it is relevant to mention the existence of two bodies of literature: research on early interventions against any form of violence in communities and schools, and existing knowledge about prevention of VAW.

A wealth of research has already indicated key factors in the prevention of violence in early education. In relation to the promotion of a peace culture, Mayes and Cohen (2002) (The Yale Child Study Center) show how the belief that pre-school children do not perceive violence is wrong, arguing that any exposure to violence at an early age becomes part of the vision of the world that children learn and interiorize. The authors also provide some effective responses to prevent children (also in early stages) from either being victims of violence or being socialized in a violent environment which may lead them to normalize violence. Similarly, researchers (Tremblay et al., 2008) from the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) found that aggression can and must be curbed as early as possible if children and toddlers are to develop into well adjusted, successful members of society. They emphasize the need to turn our attention onto the victim, instead of on the perpetrator, as soon as a violent act takes place.[2] In fact, CEECD's researchers argue that, even though the time of exposure to aggressive models increases in television shows, media models and video games, their negative influence can be avoided if there is an appropriate approach

[2] Experts highlight three key types of aggression: physical (hitting, slapping, biting, pushing,….) , verbal (use of hostile words to insult, threaten, anger or intimidate, …) and indirect (a more complex form of aggression that involves attempting to harm by spreading rumours, attempting to humiliate or demean, or excluding the victim from a group). (Tremblay et al. 2008, p.3).

from school and the community. CEECD describes different strategies which are advisable to reach this objective, such as being aware of what triggers aggressive acts and noticing how peers and adults respond when confronted with these situations.

There is another type of analyses which explores in detail the effects of performing comprehensive interventions during early childhood to prevent violent behaviors in adolescence or adulthood. These analyses are framed on the ecological approach paying particular attention to the children's social context (Fraser, 1996). Most of these interventions are designed to foster children's social skills; in other words, to develop healthy and positive personal relationships as well as to be academically successful in school (Zigler, et al. 1992). On the other hand, there is another approach which articulates a theory about peer mediation (Johnson and Johnson, 1996). This approach underlines peer-to-peer interactions in the managing of conflict situations (Cowie and Berdondini, 2001; Cowie, 2011; Houston and Smith, 2009). From this perspective, the necessity to consolidate supportive and cooperative environments that allow children to reflect on their own attitudes in school is stressed. Johnson and Johnson (1996) are world-renowned in this regard for their analysis on the role of children in conflict resolution and their involvement in mediation programmes. They identified that students build up integrative negotiation procedures aimed at solving problems of violence in schools. Thanks to the skills acquired through these processes, students continue to put them into practice months after, and even out of, school.

Specific ways to promote the 'zero violence since zero' approach have been extensively analysed through the FP6 INCLUD-ED (2006-2011), and one of these is the dialogic model of prevention and resolution of conflicts. This European Commission RTD funded project showed the importance of involving the entire community early on to create an atmosphere of zero tolerance to any type of violence, moving beyond traditional models which rely exclusively on expert intervention. Not only INCLUD-ED but also other studies (Olweus, 1993; O'Moore and Minton, 2005)

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offer consistent evidence of the significance of peers and community members in effectively combating violence in schools.

Another relevant body of literature takes account of situations of gender violence which happen in schools, although it is less prolific than the previously described. In this regard, these studies take the whole-community approach into account and findings state the benefits of involving all members of the school community in the prevention of sexual harassment, in order to ensure a safe educational environment for female students (Meraviglia et al., 2003). This research proposes school-wide interventions which reduce social acceptance of violent attitudes. For instance, groups engaging young men in discussions about healthy relationships are organized to train students, staff and relatives in the rejection of mistreatment in school contexts. Similarly, there is other research exploring the strategies followed in several schools in South Africa to prevent this problem: giving guidelines to students about the different kinds of violence against girls that occur in school, establishing committees and reporting lines, and making educators aware about their responsibility to address cases of violence (Brookes and Higson, 2004). Although these investigations provided some data on methods to address gender violence in school, there is still an important gap in this field, particularly concerning early childhood. In fact, most of the works that attempt to deepen our understanding of violence in the early stages are focused on actions to reduce delinquency and bullying, while gender violence is overlooked.

Addressing this issue, Meraviglia (Meraviglia et al., 2003) insists on the relevance of training staff and relatives in order to foster their involvement in gender violence preventive programmes. Another study analysed specifically the role of *all women* (not only female experts) in school actions addressed to identify and to combat VAW cases and conflicts among students (Oliver, et al. 2009). This study started from the contribution of *the other women* (from which the idea of all women emerges), which comes from the so-called dialogic feminism (Beck-Gernsheim et al. 2001), which has widely analysed the power of women who belong to non-privileged sectors (like housewives, non-academic women, migrant women and Romani women) for transforming unequal or oppressive situations (De Botton et al., 2005). Recent

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research evidence in this field states how the presence of *all women* in schools is considerably reducing violence-related problems, most of them linked with VAW (Garcia, 2008-2009).

Many studies have already indicated a number of dimensions that are key in the prevention of VAW. For instance, Jesus Gómez and his collaborators (Gómez, J., 2014) have conducted extensive research showing how some boys and girls follow a process of socialization where attractiveness is associated with violence while others do not. These studies and others start from the premise that adolescent attraction is not a biological phenomenon but a social one, made up of the manifold interactions to which they are exposed. Based on this research trend, the importance of peer interactions, the influence of social networks and media is clear in the configuration of models of attraction. Along these lines, Kimmel recognizes the influence of the peer group in the process of socialization of youth and in building up gender identities, as the interactions play a key role in creating expectations about one's own gender identity and sexual preferences (Kimmel, 2000).

Similarly, Bukowski, Sippola and Newcomb (2000) described how female teenagers, who consider themselves as heterosexual, feel attracted to aggressive boys and how these choices make them more vulnerable to gender violence in their first affective and sexual relationships. Research also affirms that desiring these type of men drives female teenagers to abusive dating or marital relations. Contrarily, McDaniel (2005) investigated young's women dating behaviors where there was evidence that being a 'nice guy' helped to start healthy relationships but was not especially sexually desirable for women. In this regard, the research line on preventive socialization identifies key issues to take into account. The construction of a *language of desire* towards violent profiles, for example, determines the social construction of desire connected with aggressiveness (Flecha and Puigvert, 2010). This kind of language impregnates other daily socialization agents and spaces. For instance, it is commonly observed the opposition between what is 'good' (ethics) and what is 'desirable'

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(aesthetics) in educational programs, in campaigns about VAW and among the adults who conduct the workshops of prevention with adolescents (Puigvert, 2016).

As long as prevention campaigns for VAW start from the separation between these two spheres - ethics (good) and aesthetics (desire) - they are damned to fail (Flecha et al., 2011). In other words, if we continue to portray nice guys as 'good for you' (often interpreted among youth as 'boring') and aggressive, disrespectful boys as 'mean' or 'not good' (often interpreted among youth as 'cool'), the situation will not be reversed. For example, Puigvert and colleagues (2019) published the results of their study where they analysed the patterns of attraction towards boys with violent and non-violent attitudes. Their findings highlight that boys with violent attitudes are mostly preferred for 'hooking up'. Duque (2010-2011) and Rue-Rosell, Martinez, Flecha and Alvarez (2014) also extensively examine gender violence which emerges in children, teenagers and youth. They used the concept of the *mirage of upward mobility* to describe the process that some girls and women follow when they fall into abusive relationships. This *mirage* refers to the misapprehension of some girls/women that a rise in their status or attractiveness is associated with having a sexual-affective relationship with boys/men who respond to a hegemonic model of masculinity in which imposition and dominance prevail. The reality indicates that what actually happens is precisely the opposite because their status and attractiveness decrease. These investigations shed more light into the ways in which the socialization in this mirage contributes to establishing relationships associated with violence.

As we have seen, to combat the situations described above, researchers, who have made in-depth analyses of the origins of gender violence from early childhood, coincide to give importance to peer interactions in the process of socialization. In this manner, when educational interventions pay attention to this issue, minding and giving importance to the type of interactions among children and between children, young people and other agents closely related to them (like relatives, teachers, other

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school staff or members of their communities), it is possible to contribute to build gender identities and sexual and affective relationships not conditioned by this link between violence and attraction (Kimmel, 2000).

The research community has gone further; it is not only that peer interactions are key to fully grasp the complexity of the field of sexual and affective relationships, but studies have focused on distinguishing which types of interactions have positive effects (friendship) or on the contrary, negative ones (peer pressure). Indeed, we can also find in scientific literature some key messages to contrast these processes of socialization, which promote an attraction to violence, with alternative ones which lead to passionate, healthy sexual and affective relationships. In conclusion, it is relevant to mention that research is providing key messages to contribute to the overcoming of violence against women: the quality of sexual and affective relationships is directly linked to the quality of friendship relationships (Smetana et al., 2006); to the possibility of loving, romantic relationships (based on feelings) (Giordano, 2003); to friendship among girls (Valls, et al., 2008); and to the existence of solidarity, a supportive environment and a by-stander approach at the community level.

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