

### WELCOME TO AIF!

Welcome to the second newsletter from the Alternative Future (AIF) partners!

The project, which is funded by the European Commission under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme, will run for two years, ending in December 2017. It aims to develop resources that will enable staff who work with young people in residential care to better understand how the experience of violence affects them, how gender impacts on perceptions and experience of violence, and how to support the young people more effectively. Ultimately, Alternative Future aims to reduce the risk of them becoming victims or perpetrators of violence in later life.

Six organisations are partners in the project. SURT (Fundació de dones) in Barcelona is the lead partner. SURT supports women who have been victims of abuse and has a strong track record in violence reduction approaches. The other partners are Animus (a provider of services to vulnerable children based in Sofia), Dissens (a gender education and research agency in Berlin), AMGI is a centre for masculinity research, education and psychosocial support, Innocenti (a child welfare and child policy organisation based in Florence) and Children in Scotland (the national network for child rights and wellbeing in Scotland).

### THE AIF WEBSITE

The project has its own website. Find it at <http://alternativefuture.eu>.

On the website you will find detailed information about the project as well as regular updates on partners' activity and relevant news items.

### ROUND-UP OF PARTNER NEWS

#### AMGI

The Austrian partner, the Research Department of the Association for Men's and Gender Issues Styria (AMGI) developed analysis instruments (guidelines, questionnaires) in close cooperation with the German partner Dissens. Additionally the Letters of Agreement for professionals and youth were developed. In four RCF focus group interviews with professionals were conducted according to this guideline, which was built with only a few general questions on ways professionals were confronted with children victims of violence, on their actual ways and pedagogical methods working with these children, on gender and children's rights, on good solutions or strategies when working with these children and on further needs. These interviews lasted between one and two hours, between six and nine professionals participated in the interview. Questions about further demand for the

capacity building programme typically weren't answered directly. Therefore, it was methodically very useful to have two further analysis instruments to find out needs of youth and capacity building topics for professionals.

In three of these four RCF focus groups with children/youth were possible as well – the fourth RCF was a short-term night shelter with almost daily changing clients. Both methods, the traffic light method and the welcome exercise, were conducted in the focus groups with children/youth. Traffic light was a good method to discuss different forms of violence. In one of the youth focus groups the traffic light movies motivated some youth to talk about their own experiences with different forms of violence very frankly – though the workshop facilitators explained that the children/young people should not feel forced to talk about their own experiences of violence at the beginning of the focus group.

In that RCF the young people seemed to have a high level communication culture – they had very personal and fair discussions about different forms of violence. In another RCF, they were not able to talk about sexual abuse at all. In the third RCF it was felt that there is a minimum age to use such violence sequence movies or pictures (young people should be at least 12 years old). In that RCF one of the children left earlier and researchers

had to interrupt the focus group interview after less than an hour; the other two focus group interviews lasted up to 100 minutes. Between six and ten children were participating in each group interview. Both methods helped the young people to show their knowledge, opinion and gave them a chance to talk about different forms of violence, RCF rules and methods. At the same time the research methods did not force them to talk more than they wanted about violence experiences.

A quantitative survey with professionals working in RCF also took place. The questionnaire was sent to 48 Austrian RCF who care for about 550 youth. Thirty-seven professionals answered the questionnaire. The fact that the federal Austrian welfare authority, which co-finances the work of the RCF, supported the survey may have been one motivating factor for professionals to participate in the survey.

Anonymity was absolutely guaranteed by AMGI for all three conducted assessment methods. Results of the needs assessment were presented to the heads and staff of the participating RCF and in two of them there was great interest to participate in the following capacity building programme which started at the end of 2016 and continues to 2017. To give Austrian RCF, welfare authorities and pedagogical educational institutions a better overview about results of

the needs assessment the national report was translated into German as well.

### Dissens

In Germany, the guidelines developed for the focus groups with the professionals were translated and pretty much followed during the research. They worked fine. For the workshop with the young people, we also followed the guidelines in doing the traffic light exercise on different forms of violence and doing the welcome exercise on what young people need in RCF. For the traffic light exercise, we collected a number of possible inputs and eventually decided to use nine of them, including a film clip produced by a youth media project in which a girl talks about violence she has experienced in an intimate partnership, a film clip from a Child TV station explaining sexual abuse (we decided that we did not want to present this form of violence itself but to bring it up with a film clip that already explains it as violence and shows options of how to get help. This doesn't quite follow the idea of the traffic light exercise, but felt safer in our point of view) and a film sequence in which a child in a residential care facility is not allowed to leave the table without finishing their meal (and is then locked in their room). Eventually, another child comes and eats the meal. The young people actively responded to these inputs, most often agreeing that these represent violence. In

some cases, however, discussions came up and with participants sometimes changing their opinion (usually towards "it's violence"). We had the impression that these inputs worked very well.

For the welcome exercise that raises the question "What does someone need when arriving in a RCF if they have experienced one or several of the forms of violence that we have talked about?", Tanja drew a lovely poster.

We also ran a focus group with care leavers aged 20-45. This interview started with the question from the welcome exercise: what does one need when arriving in an RCF? In addition, follow-up questions on participation and gender (similar to those used in the focus groups with professionals and children) were asked when appropriate.

The survey questions were those developed in the partnership. Thirty-two completed questionnaires were sent back to us.

### SURT

*The national results – Fundació Surt (Catalunya)*

In Catalunya the qualitative fieldwork of the needs assessment took place from March to April. After contacting residential care centres across the country, three different centres

agreed to participate in the project. Two of these facilities are mixed and provide care for children and young people aged 3-18. The other facility provides care only for girls aged 13-18.

In order to identify the needs of young people that have experienced violence and live in RCF, three focus groups with professionals and three with young people were carried out in these facilities. The total number of professionals that participated in the focus groups was 29; 24 women and five men. In total 22 children from 12 to 17 years old participated in the focus groups. They were all very motivated to participate in the project! The focus groups with professionals provided them with the opportunity to discuss their needs when working with children who are victims of violence, including the impact of gender in the experiences of violence and child-specific issues. Many interesting issues arose throughout the discussion and the atmosphere was really nice for all the participants and the facilitators. The aim of the focus group with young people was to gather information about their own experience and their needs as victims or witnesses of violence. However, as violence is a very sensitive topic, the focus group had a workshop format. It consisted of two parts: in the first part, the activity 'Violence Traffic Light' was implemented; the second part consisted of devising a 'Welcome and Support Programme' for an imagined person

who arrives in the facility and has experienced violence in the past. Most of the participants were really brave and showed no reluctances to talk about their personal experiences and share their opinions. We learned a lot with them!

Furthermore, a questionnaire was distributed among professionals working in RCFs among the country. More than 50 professionals responded to it. The results obtained correspond to a large extent to the outcome of the focus groups.

### Animus

The past few months were marked by intense and fruitful work on the project for our organisation. Our main focus was the needs assessment field work as a preparation for the training with professionals.

In this assessment we managed to include four residential facilities in Sofia, Bulgaria run by three different organisations: Concordia Foundation, SOS Children's Village and Animus Association Foundation. It was part of our intention to approach different kinds of facilities and programs in order to achieve a more full analysis.

The methods used in the focus groups with children were the Traffic light exercise where the youngsters were presented with 10 different situations of violence, abuse,

manipulation and had to classify them and explain why ("definitely violence", "cannot decide" and "not violence") and a case study – Alex's story. They were asked to give their reasoning for their choices in the first exercise and their suggestions about Alex, a boy who has suffered severe domestic abuse; how he can be helped and what his needs might be. The professionals, also participated in focus groups where their challenges and needs were discussed and they also filled in a questionnaire.

In short, as expected, most of the children in residential care have experienced some form of violence and are likely to normalise it and minimise it. Talking about it is very difficult for them and often not touching on such topics is perceived by them as a coping strategy. Often the victims of violence become perpetrators themselves. According to the staff girls were more prone to self-harm and boys to externalising behaviours like alcohol/drug abuse. Working with such traumatised young people proves to be very challenging to the social workers and their need for constant support, supervision and training is high.

To summarise, good quality and continuous training of the staff and opportunities for the children themselves to 1) work with their trauma and 2) develop effective coping mechanisms and life skills should be the focus of future interventions in such places and programmes.

## Innocenti

The Istituto degli Innocenti completed the needs assessment phase in two residential facilities for children aged 12-21 by carrying out focus groups with professionals and young people.

In both cases the focus groups proved very participative and members were willing to discuss and share their concerns about issues relating to gender, violence and children's rights. In particular, boys and girls discussed matters relating to gender stereotypes, domestic violence, bullying and cyber-bullying.

The discussion was based on the carrying out of exercises and on the watching of videos from theatre performances and movies. This was done in order to make the discussion easier and to avoid children being confronted directly with personal episodes of violence.

Young people showed a very good ability to identify and discuss both gender stereotypes and indicators of violence. The focus group for professionals addressed the following issues: the relationship between violence and gender, the prevention of violence and the creation of a culture of care in the residential care facility and, the training of professionals. Moreover a questionnaire on the needs of professionals was distributed among a number of residential care facilities.

The needs that emerged more frequently are: the difficulty children have in talking about their experiences of violence; the necessity to de-normalise violence within the residential care facility; the need for a specific training in order to identify violence at an early stage and, the creation of a culture of care by balancing the young people's need for privacy and autonomy with protection from violence.

After completing the needs assessment report and on the basis of its result, the Istituto degli Innocenti initiated a capacity building programme for professionals from residential care facilities and about 30 people participated.

The programme included five sessions addressing the following topics: the sex/gender system and the creation of gender norms and stereotypes; the intersectionality approach; the different manifestation of violence, trauma and resilience, including gender violence and homophobic bullying and, children's rights. The capacity building programme included both a theoretical and a practical approach. The working groups were focused in particular at discussing how to pay attention to gender norms in the everyday organisation of the residential care facility and in the implementation of children's rights by balancing the need of the protection of children with the respect of their views and their privacy.

## Children in Scotland

Like our partners, we have been busy here in Edinburgh carrying out the data gathering from young people and staff in care settings, organising the delivery of the Capacity Building Programme and planning for the final conference which will take place here in Edinburgh in November.

The City of Edinburgh Council has been very supportive of the project and enabled us to speak to young people and staff in its residential care facilities and to some of its foster carers. All those we spoke to were hugely helpful and we met so many outstanding and inspiring individuals. We now have a wealth of powerful and rich data which has informed the content of the CBP, but which we also hope will help and inform us in other awareness raising and service development activities.

Our CBP will be delivered in March and we are partnering with ThemPra (<http://www.thempra.org.uk>), a social enterprise that provides professional development opportunities for care workers, based on a social pedagogical approach, in providing it.

We are at the early stages of planning the final conference, but we hope to secure a venue that reflects our city's rich heritage and

history. More details will follow, but we very much look forward to welcoming our partners and guests.

### **AIF Needs Assessment: comparative results**

As a first step in the project, all partner countries investigated the situation and needs of young people who have experienced violence and live in RCFs and the professionals working with them. For this, focus group discussions and surveys were conducted in six European regions: Catalunya (Spain), Styria (Austria), Berlin (Germany), Edinburgh (Scotland), Florence (Italy) and Sofia (Bulgaria).

The results of the national reports have been summarised in a transnational report. This report shows that in all regions covered by this project, residential care exists as a form of care provided to children whose healthy development is at risk and who cannot get other forms of assistance and intervention that could improve the situation.

Children's rights and wellbeing have become guiding principles of child and youth welfare in most regions, alongside a process of deinstitutionalisation in which forms of residential care with large numbers of young people stuck together in one facility and authoritative forms of education are replaced

by other forms of care that are thought to be better suited to children's needs. At the same time, neglect of children's rights and views still occurs in some ways, for example when young people's rights to privacy and to have their complaints taken seriously are neglected.

Helping young people who have experienced violence has been identified in all regions as a major challenge that needs further capacity-building amongst professionals. The needs of those young people include safe environments that provide reliable and non-violent relationships and enable rest and distraction, caring environments that show respect and understanding and provide a sense of belonging, spaces of empowerment which recognise young people as bearers of rights, and instructive spaces that teach young people something that de-normalise violence.

In order to provide young people with what they need, professionals working in residential care need to be taught how to create such a safe, caring and supportive environment. Furthermore, they need opportunities to reflect upon the dynamics at work, between and amongst young people, professionals and the wider environment of the facility. This includes a reflection on how notions and norms of gender impact upon experiences of violence, on coping strategies and on the lives

of young people in general. Consequently, such a reflection requires that professionals explore and reflect ideas of gender that they themselves hold and present, directly or indirectly, towards the young people they work with, as these ideas influence the caring relationship that they offer and form with the young people.

The surveys conducted in the partner regions have shown that professionals are very interested in building their capacity in working with children who are victims of violence. They are particularly interested in training that helps them work with experiences of violence and trauma amongst the young people. Gender, diversity and children's rights are also issues that professionals are interested in, however these issues need to be clearly connected to issues around experiences of violence for professionals to be motivated to do those trainings. The capacity-building programme will pick up these insights and further detailed recommendations gathered in the needs assessment.

### **The Capacity Building Programme (CBP)**

Once the needs assessment has been completed, the next step planned is the implementation of the Capacity Building Programme (CBP). In fact, all the partners have already started or are about to start conducting this phase of the project in their regions.

The aim of the CBP is to respond to the specific needs identified throughout the Needs Assessment. So, the design and implementation of this phase are based on the results of the research carried out previously.

Although the general contents and structure of the CBP were agreed with all the organisations, each partner is free to adapt them to their own country. In this sense, the specific experiences and recommendations of the professionals and young people gathered in the Needs Assessment were taken into account along the implementation of the different activities.

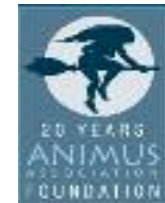
Moreover, the CBP aims to improve professionals' knowledge on the impacts and trauma of different types of violence on children. It is intended to provide them with practical knowledge and tools to know how to intervene and deal with these situations, as well as improve their professional praxis in order to meet children's identified needs.

The contents of the CBP are based on a gender perspective and child rights approach. So, a reflection on the impact of gender as well as the neglect of children's rights in RCFs is fostered throughout the sessions of the CBP.

At the end of the CBP, the professionals will be prepared to design and implement the 'Specific support actions to empower children in RCF'. For that reason the last session of the CBP is used to work on them and start thinking about the issues and the activities they want to carry out in their centres.

Finally, we hope that the implementation of the CBP runs successfully in all regions and that great actions for the empowerment of children are going to be planned!

## Partner information:



## Associate partners and co-financers:

The Scottish Government Looked After Children Division is also supporting the project.



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