

THE VOICE OF SURVIVORS

Survey with survivors within SASCA European project

**Support to Adult Survivors of Child Abuse in institutional settings
SASCA [JUST/2015/JACC/AG/VICT/9292]**

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SUMMARY

DATA OF THE EUROPEAN SURVEY WITH THE SURVIVORS INTERVIEWED	3
THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS	6
Entry and daily life	6
Abuse and illtreatment	8
Sexual abuse	9
Physical violence	9
Psychological abuse	9
Exploitation	10
Disclosure of abuse	11
Responsibility	13
Prevention	14
Justice, compensation, specific rights	16
Conclusion	19

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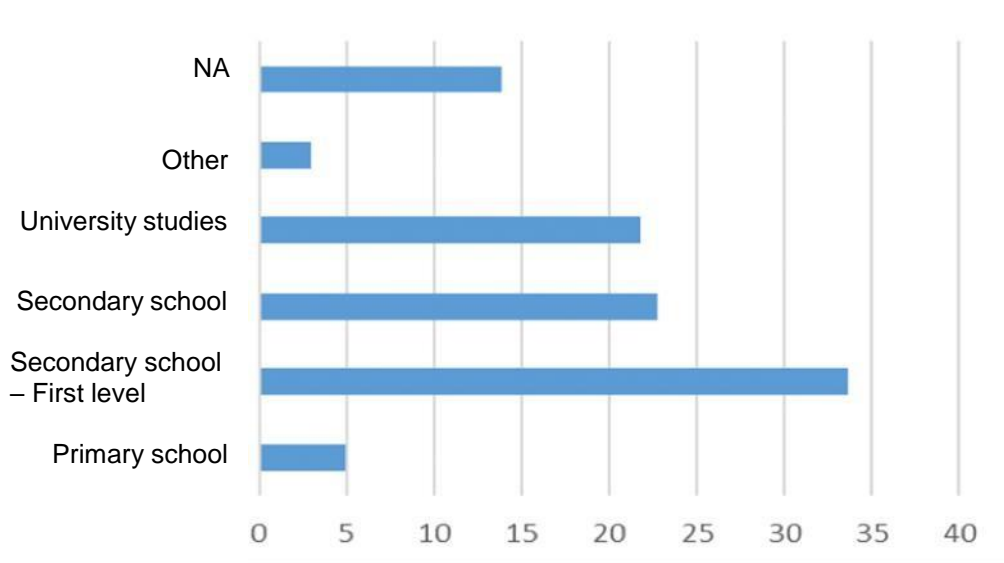
DATA OF THE EUROPEAN SURVEY WITH THE SURVIVORS INTERVIEWED

The interview work carried out through the project represented a very complex and difficult phase that, in trying to give shape to the phenomenon of institutional maltreatment linked to measures of residential institutions, had to deal with the legitimate fatigue and uncertainty of the survivors to share and tell their experience.

The number of respondents, a total of 101 people, could have been much higher if many initial contacts had managed to turn into an appointment for a face-to-face or telephone interview, or if it had been possible to qualify and quantify homogeneously and consistently with the project, the collective stories already emerged that have been reported to us also in Italy. During the months of the project dedicated to the collection of the interviews, there have been unsuccessful contacts because of the fear of people of being recognized or of narrating, sometimes for the first time, serious experiences suffered in the residential contexts. We refer, in particular, to the survivors of the horrors of the Antonio Provolo Institute of Verona and belonging to the Association of the Deaf Antonio Provolo. Their story has come to the attention of news and judicial authorities in recent years, thanks to the courage of some adults who have found the strength to denounce the serious violence suffered for years in that Institute for minors deaf, managed by a religious congregation. In 2009, over 60 people, boys and girls who had lived in the Institute, signed a letter of complaint and since then their testimonies have been widespread and are also present on the web, but they have remained almost entirely without formal follow-up since the facts are referred in large part to a period that reaches the middle of the eighties, and therefore they have gone into prescription.

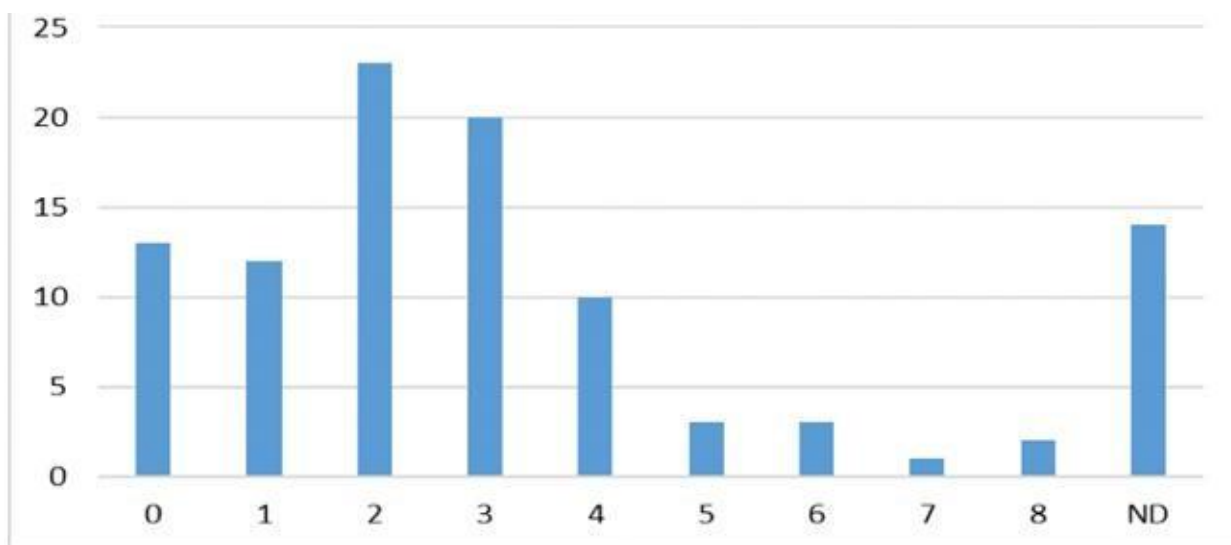
In Greece, the group involved in the SASCA project has made the analysis more complex thanks to their work with a residential institute, Lechaina institution, for people with severe disabilities: 51 people now adults, unarmed and disabled, forced to live since childhood or adolescence in conditions of total and serious neglect, victims of all kinds of violence and segregated in beds or in dark rooms. A reality known by the local context, but in fact ignored by the services and authorities. The SASCA project, therefore, even if carried out in countries with a strong tradition of institutionalization - once - and today more properly speaking of hospitality, has had to deal with the devastating damages produced by violence, shame, fear of speaking and difficulty of the victims to tell their stories.

The 101 respondents are relatively balanced by gender, 45% of the sample is made up of women and 55% of men. 57% of respondents are single and around 53% are employed. 80% have become a parent, 10% of three or more children. In our sample the educational qualification is medium-high due to a strong presence of respondents with high school and university studies among Romanian respondents.



87% of them were born in a family in which there were also other children, in 74% of the cases there were at least two other brothers or sisters and in over half of the cases they too were removed from the family unit. However, this is a question that, about a fifth of respondents, do not know how to answer either because they do not remember, either because in many cases the contacts with the brothers and sisters were lost, or they were not kept together.

Table: Number of brothers and sisters



The institutionalization took place during childhood and had a variable and relatively long duration, with hospitality in contexts characterized by the presence of numerous and multiform types of risk, from material and emotional neglect to more serious forms of violence and abuse. To the situations of more or less serious prejudice or maltreatment lived in the family of origin, were then added, subsequent traumatic experiences whose intensity and severity, in many cases, went well beyond the foreseeable impact of a process of institutionalization.

The current consequences of trauma of being taken away from the family of origin, of life in community or in the institute and of any direct violence suffered, seem to be expressed by a variegated symptomatology, more or less intense and present, which includes signs of both hyper arousal (psycho-physiological hyper-activation) and depressive as well as various physical

disturbances. The hyperarousal is a symptom of post-traumatic stress characterized by insomnia, irritability, anxiety, aggression and generalized tension, in our sample we report these symptoms almost daily or however frequent during the week regarding:

- feelings of anger (about 15%);
- widespread stirring state (20% always or almost always, 40% more times a week);
- insomnia (23% of respondents with high frequency, but overall affects one in two people);
- Aggressive reactions towards others (of which they must then apologize) about 20% with frequency, but it is an experience reported by one person in five and happening during the week.

Opposing introversion dynamics are revealed through symptoms such as:

- feeling depressed or hopeless (over 15% as practically constant, but is reported as present by another 40%);
- the constant perception that everything goes wrong (reported by 67% of respondents);
- difficulty concentrating (referred by 45% of respondents);
- exhaustion and lack of energy (20%);
- sense of failure (15% as constant experience, 27% as present perception);
- lack of hunger (20%);
- suicidal thoughts or death thoughts (reported by over a third of the people);
- self-harm (reported by one in five respondents).

Physical symptoms are also associated to difficulties of emotional and relational nature; there are no reports of particular food problems of anorexic or bulimic type, the discomforts present and creating distress over a period of time, by convention, established within the four weeks preceding the interview, are:

- abdominal pain (reported by 47% of respondents)
- joint pain - back (49.7%)
- joint pain - legs and arms (56%)
- menstrual cramps - almost all women report them, the term chosen denotes the presence of a particularly painful cycle
- headache (64%)
- chest pains (about 25% report them);
- dizziness (34%)
- fainting (19%)
- tachycardia (30%)
- shortness of breath (28%)
- constipation or diarrhoea (39%)
- nausea, intestinal gas (21%)

These symptoms are present in a recurring way and people perceive them as a disturbing factor, as a constant discomfort that creates an obstacle and reduces the quality of their days, their degree of well-being. When asked how difficult the impact of these disturbances had been in the two weeks before the interview, about 10% report that these are situations that create a lot or extreme difficulty in managing life and 38% report them as quite difficult, and finally about a third of them does not answer or fails to qualify them.

It is an overall effect that in people's lives diminishes the interest or the pleasure of living in everyday life, a black veil that seems to wrap almost every day of at least one in ten interviewees, among those who have managed to answer this question, however, something very well known by at least 40% of the people we met, who say to often have to confront with this feeling during their week.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

We have to say, it was difficult to find people available to tell their stories. There are a thousand of good reasons that these people have to be suspicious, not wanting to contribute to insufficient attempts of reflection of a system that they have known as dull, superficial, disinterested.

In Italy most of the interviews were possible because there was prior knowledge with the person, often built within a therapeutic path. Most of these interviews were done with the survivors of Il Forteto and of I Celestini. However, there are also individual experiences of institutional maltreatment that do not fall into these two great events and that refer mainly to religious institutions.

In Greece there are no collective forms of organization such as associations of former residents. In the very few cases where they exist, either they underfunction and contact with them is not possible, or they are formed in a very defensive and dichotomous way where the period in institution is idealized and access to unpleasant experiences is psychologically risky and not accessible. The sample collected is coming from different regions of Greece; Athens, Crete, Patra and Kalamata, which is something that permits us to collect information, data and personal experiences from various institutions of the Greek territory.

It is important to note, in comparison with other European countries, how the same meeting for interviews with surviving adults has been easier in Romania, where the focus of the research is part of a "proud" movement of civil claim of the rights of former children guests of the orphanages, which attenuates the stigmatization and confirms the precious value of a welcoming and supportive response of the social context.

The survey procedure is consisted by a self-administrated questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire contains demographic data and optional scales which measure the attachment style and the physical effects of the trauma (somatisation).

Together with these children, boys and girls today adults, we were confronted with the specific effects of a very serious form of maltreatment, the one in institutional context. What have happened was made been possible by the fact that children have been first inserted and then abandoned in these institutional residential context by those institutions that had intervened to protect them.

In each one of these cases the whole institutional system ignored the incident or was even collusive, or active actor. We therefore choose to emphasize the voice and the perspective of those former boys and girls to whom the State, the protection system and the civil community itself, should have guaranteed protection.

Entry and daily life

The people interviewed, for the most part, report an initial positive impact with the community. In fact, they are often places that are objectively beautiful

Some speak of a real fascination; fascination that, dramatically, seems to also include the operators, being functional to a defensive movement that allows, the operator first, to avoid the contact with the pain. It often happens that the communication that social workers do to the child regarding their next placement in the Community is accompanied by assurances regarding the pleasantness of the place: "you will go to a beautiful place".

And here we already find the first traces of a distortion not only communicative, but also and above all relational: in the stories we heard, more than supporting the child in the separation from his family and in the unavoidable pain that this entails, or in the umpteenth change of structure, the social worker takes refuge in the logistical and aesthetic advantages that the new placement seems to bring with it, minimizing even the sharing of realistic information.

At first I felt like I had gone to heaven... I came from a boarding school where you did not have any reference figure... and there instead there were figures... parenting, the "mother" was sleeping with me, it was all a giving me things, and at least in the initial phase I seemed to be who knows where...

That day I was fascinated by this environment. He took us to see the whole company and then he took me to the dairy, he introduced me to my future parents; Then he accompanied me to the sheepfold because they also had animals: sheep, cows, horses, goats.

At about 4.30... the Social Worker asked me: "but what do you want to do, do you want to go home or do you want to stay here for a week?". And I said I wanted to stay without even thinking twice... But then I have never seen the Social Worker again. I have not seen anyone anymore.

They tried to show me Il Forteto as a farm with animals... I have always been passionate about horses and there were the horses there - The first day I was all the time at the stable... It was presented to me like a beautiful farm, where I would have been for a while. [...] I had no idea that I had to live with 100 people. They haven't told me this thing.

After the fascination of the first days, the substance of everyday reality was not slow to reveal itself.

The descriptions of the environments, the rigid routines and rules of everyday life, the absence of spaces and personal objects, the anonymous and uniform clothing, make up the typical picture of totalizing institutions, often hidden from the inattentive looks of external professionals and of entire villages.

Thus, the slow and progressive process of depersonalization, of destruction of the individual identity, begins for the child.

The common part at most of the interviews in all countries is the comparison survivors are making, of the institution with military camps or prisons. Survivors underline the austerity and the rigidity in daily life routine. They mention that rarely something was happening in order to make a day different and that they had to follow a structured program with very few liberties for personal time. Another common characteristic is the absence of privacy. Sharing the same dormitory with many other children or having to take a bath in the same time with the others while waiting almost naked in the line were common practices mentioned by the survivors.

My mother brought gifts both to me and to my brother, but I remember especially once that they gave us two identical remote controlled cars, and both the two remote controls did not work and they told us "did you see what a crap they gave you?" and they threw everything into the fire.

If you asked me to describe my room, I would ask you: which one? And I would reply that I do not remember them all. There has never been an important room for me and with these constant changes of rooms I did not feel I had one of my own.

When I was a teenager there was also the "bathroom problem".. in my house, i was used to use it whenever i wanted and with no limits of time in there, and it was the same with the shower.. it was my space, my time with my body, my personal intimacy, I was free to do whatever I wanted..But there I was timed. They used to control every time I was in the bathroom, how many times in a day, complaining about the time i wasted there, insinuating that I was masturbating or making erotic fantasies at the mirror, I don't know.. after a while I was required to have my shower with the door open so that she (the foster mother) could check what I was doing..

In many places visits were possible once a week, usually on Sundays. Holidays and summertime was also an opportunity for children who had a family to spend this time with the family at home.

In cases also where the school was outside of the institution, the participants had the opportunity to interact socially with another environment, however many of them mention that they had to face stigmatization by their classmates and sometimes by the teachers since bullying (psychological or physical) against children who came from institutions was a common practice.

On the other hand in Italian interviews it recurs, also if in different ways, the demonization of the external world, the extreme limitation and control of the contacts outside the community, in some experiences especially and first with the families of origin.

Our parents came to visit us and when they came, the adults of the community watched us, it happened a lot of times, they watched us and wandered around us. And they heard what I was saying to my mother and brought him back to Rodolfo, and if he did not like it he would beat you...

It is frequent that after the release the survivors found out that their families had not given up on keeping in touch, but had been in various ways rejected and dismissed. Furthermore, in Italy at Il Forteto the relationships with the families of origin were intentionally destroyed even by false accusations of sexual abuse.

The strategy changes radically when the outsiders are important personalities, or social services operators. In this case, in fact, the visits are encouraged, incentivized and often prepared with care, almost like a theater show.

"We got dressed with the new clean and ironed apron, shiny sandals, to appear, to the many who came to visit the institute, healthy and beautiful"

The impression that I had was that we were in jail, bound, you could not escape, you were super-controlled. Then there were all the representative visits, of personalities... judges, social workers, politicians came to Il Forteto, but you showed them the beautiful part, the whole company. The visits were prepared... The sacred rooms were the most beautiful living rooms of the manor, there were ancient frescoes on the walls and for this you called them the "sacred rooms"... ... they were used and arranged on purpose as rooms of representation. Basically you always made them see a certain Forteto, not what was happening.

The theme of control - of single individualities, of the outside, of the affective and relational world of each person - follows every aspect of life in these communities. In our interviews we see with the eyes of the children the internal world of the total institutions described by Goffman (1961) where everything is marked by the fear of authority and the will of the adult, which often leaves children at the mercy of unprepared educators, or in turn they are plagiarized / conditioned by the system. The assumption of an individual identity is hindered by a system of privileges, obedience and fear of punishment.

Yet, paradoxically, in Italy Il Forteto proposed itself until 2011 as a pedagogical alternative of excellence to the totalizing experiences of the past. And in Romania while it is obvious from the interviews that in the last 15 years there were extensive changes in life-conditions (cloths, meals, intimacy) comparing with life in mammoth institutions, and some forms of abuse and neglect became less frequent (sexual abuse of boys from the behalf of older boys, exploitation and physical abuse from the behalf of older children), unfortunately abusive adults continue to work with children and according to the interviewed persons a caring, loving professional (even in foster care) is more an exception than a rule. The staff, which would have the duty to raise and educate children still needs to be properly selected, trained, motivated financially and given emotional support in order to prevent burn-out.

Abuse and ill-treatment

Furthermore, all of them tell of serious:

1. sexual abuse from part of professionals and from part of older children
2. physical violence
3. psychological/ verbal abuse that have been repeated over the years

4. exploitation from the part of educators/staff members and from the part of older children

Sexual abuse

And in fact he liked not only my speech, but maybe me to, when I was little. And of course he asked permission to take me from O. [name of the city], to various places, but I was always sleeping next to him, and I woke up many times that he was caressing me, or I fell asleep or woke up without pyjama-trousers, and all these events left harsh, deep marks on my life, I didn't dare to tell about it

Sexual abuse began more or less immediately... There was this approach on his part... the vast majority of the times that I was put in punishment he arrived and freed me from the punishment, the saviour. He had created this story where he proposed himself as the one who took me away from punishment knowing my problems, my things... Then he invited me in his car to go for a ride and slowly came to put his hand on the genitals, saying "You like it, I know that you like it"...

Do him oral stuff, masturbate him and let him... well, let him fuck you. You couldn't resist, you couldn't say anything, in fact he tried to buy me, he eventually gave me money, he gave me... (So there was one specific person who requested this from you?) Not only one, no. There were also among the younger and the older too, youngsters, who didn't have... at a certain point there were some who did this for cigarettes, other kids for I don't know... for money. And believe me, it's still going on now.' (male, 29).

It was well known that the older were sexually abusing smaller children. Watch his penis, and if not, you got beaten, or you were surrounded by several boys, they took out your penis and kept pawing it, things like that... It also happened that they took out their penis, now touch it, hold it, if not, they beat you. You had to do even if you didn't want to.'

Physical violence

They kept her locked in her room for ten days and told us that she was in punishment... but it was to make the bruises on her disappear: I remember that he had put her at the window, there were the the shutters of the windows and he beat them on her face. They kept her in her room for ten days. They told us that she was in her room because she had been a fool, that she was a slut and had fantasies... Another episode that I remember was when they put a girl with down syndrome to the kneading trough naked, all naked, telling that she was naughty.

Psychological/ verbal abuse

Many participants mentioned that the way the personnel talked with them knocked down their self esteem, crushed their personality.

"They talked to us as we were dull, and handicapped. This word handicapped finished me, killed me. I felt it constantly bumping in my head"(male, 23).

We worked a lot and, if you make a mistake, had a fight while playing, they used to say "you're freaking out, sit down". A lot of punishments, we were forced to sit all day long, or to stand in front of the others while they had lunch. Then back to sit, for hours. At the end they used to come and ask "So, why did you freak out?" and I was so tired that I didn't even remember what I had done.

There was this cupboard, you were forced to stand there, without moving, while the others were eating, or in the corner, facing the wall. When I was 16 I was dressed like a woman and forced to walk under the look of everybody dressing a flowered robe.

Why?

Because they wanted me to exorcize my femininity that way.

I used to stay entire days sitting, till they got my confession, cause at the end of the day I used to confess whatever they wanted, but it was never what I lived actually.

They used to tell me that when I was home I used to eat dog food, because of that I wasn't able to

eat there.

Sometimes my mother used to get drunk and went to bed without preparing dinner, so I was used to drink milk by myself.

But they always said that I used to eat dog food and they repeated it so long that then I convinced myself that it was true.

Once Rodolfo gave me a bowl with some dog food and told me "You see, you like this stuff" and I was forced to say that it was true while all around there were other children.

Exploitation

In large institutions, but also in family type homes, we detected widespread forms of exploitation.

In many institutions the staff delegated many of their responsibilities to older children, and by not supervising the activities, it set the law of the jungle in the institution. In other institutions there was a supervisor for each room, an older child, who was responsible for smaller children, and who had full right to discipline and exploit no matter how younger children.

In certain institutions, some of the common works were supervised by older children, while the staff didn't participate in the process, or consented to the cruelty the children were treated with who didn't work as expected. There were institutions where the unpleasant works (for example washing the toddlers and changing their diaper) were the task of children, even if they were too small to be able to perform these tasks:

In general there were a lot of children who wetted or made a mess in the bed during the night, and when we grew older, we, the older children had to change them, wash them, replace the linen, so that's how usually the morning begun.

The staff's own responsibilities were delegated to children against a reward or by punishing them (usually by beating them) if they didn't meet the request, while not taking account of the children's needs:

In the night, they introduced these in the night, they came to your room or called you to give you a job in the night, go clean the bathroom, go... they didn't do anything, don't imagine they would have do the cleaning or anything else. We were doing everything. (I, male, 29)

Requesting personal services to children which made them feel uncomfortable: starting from massage, manicure, washing the car, carrying during the night the staff's own clothes washed in the centre to sexual services.

Seizing of children's goods: Christmas presents, clothes, toys, hygienic products, sweets, especially those received from abroad as aids and also money and food.

In foster care the most common forms of exploitation were the involving of children in hard works, which solicited their free time entirely, using the money received for caring in own purposes, the seizing of the children's money.

At first it was very odd, because just as I got there, at seven in the morning the next day they woke me up to go to the field, so work from the beginning, I had to work. They said it was good to get used to how rural life was, because I had grown up and lived in a town. Well, it was very hard and terrible for me, because we were also travelling a lot, I was tired too, and we got to the foster parents at 9 in the evening, and at 7 in the morning they already called me to go to work. It was a terrible feeling for me... I never had some time for myself, some free time to go playing, to feel how it was to be a child, because I had to go to the field all the time. I was biking 20 km to get to the field after school. I never had a free day, I said at least let Sunday be a day when I could feel I was free for a while. (A., female, 26)

In the case of Il Forteto it was an actual exploitation of children labour.

The agricultural cooperative Il Forteto over the years has become a reality of undeniable entrepreneurial importance. In addition to livestock and organic farming, the co-operative has a

riding school, a cheese factory that exports products to many foreign countries, a bakery, a supermarket, and a direct sale plant nursery. It has been the same members of the community that created this "empire", it is them who restructured the buildings, who created cattle breeding, who dealt with the cultivation, the store. It is them who worked 82 hours a week to realize what has become a company with a turnover of 15 million Euro per year (2011). Also children worked uninterruptedly.

After our homework we used to go to the laundry to bend, iron and wash clothes and sheets.. we were required to separate cleaned and dirty clothes that arrived from every house. We used to make piles of socks, panties, trousers... we had to pre-wash them by hand to delete spots. It was a job.

Then we used to make them dry, then iron, bend, separate them to pile of clean stuff to give back to the houses. Each of us had a number or a letter on his/her clothes so we knew in wich closet we should put them when they were clean.

In summer we used to clean everything, floors, beds...

At 5 in the morning we used to go to the dairy to twist the milk, to make mozzarella.. sometimes we went back there after school.

Disclosure of abuse

In most of the cases, survivors revealed their story many years after the abuse had taken place.

The disclosure of violence didn't happen because children were threatened, ashamed or didn't know whom to disclose, or if it happened children rarely were listened or their situation became even worse after they filed a complaint.

In some situations, although the situation was known in the institution, there wasn't any intervention out of wrongly understood confidentiality. It was needed a report from a specialist outside the institution for something to happen.

There was an educator whom I told everything, but I asked them not to do anything, so they couldn't take measures, but I always talked about it with that educator and cried on their shoulders.'

The interviews, in all countries, confirm that even with respect to the crucial issue of revelation, being abused in institutional settings is an important factor of gravity and complexity. How can you tell and to whom, the maltreatment and abuse that you suffer in a place that should protect and defend you?

We are facing a gigantic scam, a bombardment of confusing, contradictory and destabilizing messages, in which the typical power imbalance that always characterizes the relationship between mistreated / abused minor and the abusive adult is elevated at its finest, where the unveiling and the revelation are even more difficult, for the abused minors it is almost impossible to think they could be believed, or to ask for help. There is no adult to whom they can look at. No one sees, no one understands. There is no alternative relationship to refer to, in order to find the strength to tell what happens in the dysfunctional, but emotionally significant relationships that they have.

And the frame of all this is a paradoxical communication, on the verge of perversion: "I move you away from your family - with all that I know it involves - to protect you; and to do so I put you in a new and often more seriously maltreatment context".

All that remains to the small victims is to think that what happens is right, that it should make sense if nobody protects. The thought of not being worthy of anything else, of not being worthy of love, is combined with the conviction that what happens is deserved.

To strengthen the pervasive experience of impotence and the perception of not being credible, contributes the external credit of the communities and the frequent visits of the exteriors, who never saw anything.

“First I’ve been beaten by my parents and then by the community leader... I was a little bastard”

Inside me there was that feeling that they were too big to be able to tell someone what I could suffer

“I always hoped someone would notice something... There were so many people coming to Il Forteto, I always hoped...”

There are, however, attempts to tell.

At school, it seemed that the teachers did not notice. Yes, even there I hoped: one year a boy had escaped, they looked for him, and it happened several times. But they never thought that maybe it was not good there...

One day this boy in the classroom started saying what this priest was doing, and the teacher, instead of investigating if the problem existed, turned off the discussion by saying "but what do you say? do you think these are speeches to do? And at that moment I thought "come on now this thing will come out and finally I expose myself", but I saw that instead the teacher has turned off everything and I saw disappear the only hope I had. the teacher silenced him right away. What the fuck, the only person you talk to makes you shut up, who do I go to?!

References to escapes are frequent.

With respect to the enormous difficulty of revealing the abuses and maltreatments that one underwent or witnessed every day, the survivors clearly tell us about the powerful experiences that have prevented the revelation for years, for decades: fear; shame; sense of guilt; impotence. Fear in particular is paralyzing.

I was always afraid to talk, to tell. I was afraid. I felt guilty. It's hard to even explain, but I also felt guilty about what I could say and so I avoided talking. I realized I was not well, but I felt guilty for not feeling good. Talking was like hurting the place where I grew up, the people who loved me.

I was growing up not like any other teenager, but rather slowly, like a child who grows every year only of half a year, always shy, frightened. You sleep afraid, you walk afraid, you eat and are afraid. You have always fear.

The shame is constantly strengthened from the outside "You are like your mother!", but to this is added the shame of the victim, of those who suffer, the shame of which Primo Levi speaks saying that "the fair feels shame in front of the guilt committed by others and and the remorse bends him that exists, that has existed, that has been irrevocably introduced into the world of things that exist, and that his goodwill has been nothing or poor and has not been worth in defense". Shame and guilt very often for not being able to react.

Telling also means exposing oneself to the risk of "being pitied or making pity". We find this experience again today, in the complicated formulation of a request for help.

We hear in the words of those former children, how deep was the sense of loneliness, insecurity, how totalizing the loss of trust in relationships, and how pervasive the intensity of anger.

“I have really set aside trust, even that one towards myself...”

“Sometimes I am so full of rage and the worst thing is that I do not even know against who...”

I never saw that there could be an alternative, so I adapted more. But in this adaptation I also protected myself.

For many of them, the urge to start having a different perspective came with the opportunity to have more contact with the outside; an occasion that often arrives with the achievement of late adolescence, or early adulthood. Confronting, sometimes for the first time, with a reality or with another voice, sheds new light on the life within the community, and the process of normalization that had been defensively consolidated over the years, cracks.

More generally, for almost all the interviewed survivors, the revelation has been a long and tiring

process that has matured almost always once they were out of the community, this means in adulthood. An important incentive is also the relationship among equal; some survivors tell us that the comparison with peers, who were sharing the same experience, from a certain point onwards was very important, not only to receive the support needed to survive, but also to become aware and take courage.

Hence, as the work on trauma teaches us, the most significant relationships are the most powerful damage agent, and the significant relationships have the most powerful reparative potential.

Responsibility

In the situations of institutional maltreatment that we have investigated, the issue of responsibilities, and consequently that one of prevention, are central. And the words we heard in the interviews, and that we listen together again, are an important occasion, for each of us, to question ourselves about our work, about the meaning of our professional actions.

We asked the respondents to tell us who they consider responsible for what happened, if possible in descending order with respect to the severity of the responsibility.

The majority of the respondents identify the greater responsibilities in those who first removed them from their family of origin, and then placed and abandoned them in the residential structure: social workers and judges. Most of the times, the individual authors of the violences are mentioned only after. Psychologists and natural parents are also nominated. In the specific case of Il Forteto many of the respondents also mention all the adult founding members, and some of them mention even the children who became adults within it, since they would have had to intervene to protect them from the mechanisms of the sect and interrupt them.

It is easy to understand how the theme of the responsibilities aroused in the survivors particularly intense waves of anger, and sometimes of disbelief.

The feeling that runs along the interviews in all the different countries is the sense of corruption, superficiality and indifference from the system, which did not want to see and understand.

I do not even feel anger, I feel disgust, because I think it is washing their hands and not give a shit of each other's ass. A negligence of the magistrates and of the Social Services that followed the minors in custody at Il Forteto, treated so lightly... They made decisions based on friendship. These were the mistakes that led them, the members of Il Forteto, to be so powerful.

Social workers... They took us, they put us there... we were granted as if we were goods to be unloaded from a truck...

The first responsibility, the biggest one, I attribute it to the members who were there from the beginning, those who allowed to continue the maltreatment. Then there are also the missed checks of the Social Services. But first the adults who were there at the first conviction, even those close to me

The judges, the social workers... They were dazzled seeing only the appearance without ever really seeing what was the reality and, when it comes to minors, they must not have their eyes dazzled by appearances but must use the heart and the brain, first of all. Why, I ask myself why? I condemn everyone... the Judge and the social workers and then I condemn all of Il Forteto, all and everybody except the children.

In the interviews it recurs, dramatic, the theme of the coverage, of the collusions. This last aspect is very present even among the survivors of religious institutes; the precise and conscious will of the Church, and of its important exponents, to conceal the facts is repeatedly underlined, and it seems in fact to find an objective confirmation in the repeated and late scandals relating to sexual abuse in ecclesiastical circles. More people tell us about these events of having suffered threats even years later.

Many times people tell us "Why did not you say it before?" Look at the facts of today and give yourself an answer: even now many do not believe us, they continue to defend... Imagine before. Too many hook-ups.

In one of the interviews, it is explicitly stated that former children who have had such experiences should be qualified as "system victims". Also the title of this day refers immediately to the system responsibilities; but we cannot deny that the assumption of responsibility on the part of the complex of services and institutions is always extremely difficult. We seem to be able to affirm that today's attention, and the interest it has aroused, are the first step in a great challenge, of which it is essential to be able to share the meaning.

In the case of institutional maltreatment, in the cases we are talking about, the operators - even when they have not been personally involved - through the institutions they are part of - have made the violence, not only permissible but even possible, becoming at some level actors consciously or guilty distracted or inadequate. To see therefore the institutional maltreatment implies necessarily to question themselves, their own methodological tools, their own professional practices, to open themselves to the concrete possibility of having been able - at least - to commit serious mistakes.

The respondents expressed their doubts concerning the possibility to achieve substantial changes in a system in which the same staff continues to work which was compromised due to abuses and neglect towards children:

'So that's what is needed, for youngsters and children alike, to replace the system and let really good experts work, they should break down all of it, on which this system is built, and replace the people who work there, because the person who worked in that system and is still in, can't change in my opinion. It is difficult, or I don't know if it's even possible to step out of it.'

Prevention

The difficulty in recognizing and working constructively on professional responsibilities is inevitably a major limitation in the possibility to make prevention.

Some of the interviewed speak about prevention talking about the capacity to detect immediately dangerous behaviours of the operators by external supervisors or some others speak about the possibility to prevent abuse and ill-treatment by the operators of the community themselves.

Survivors are very proactive in indicating possible strategies and tools for the prevention of institutional maltreatment. Practically they all agree in identifying one of the crucial factors to prevent maltreatments, there should be a continuous relationship with an external operator, almost always identified in their own social worker. The perception of the survivors is that once the placement has taken place, the "problem" is solved, the social worker does not care about how the insertion proceeds and how the child is doing, and disappears along with his/her mandate. Or sometimes the social workers alternate, one after the other, strangers and not attentive, every time.

Another recurrent and central aspect is that visits, observations, and ratings never have the character of confidentiality, since the adults belonging to the community are always present. And this also happens in the rarer, but not less significant cases, in which the children have been involved in counselling, psychological paths, listening with juvenile judges, more regular visits with social workers...

The most important protective factor, compared to the risk of institutional maltreatment, seems instead to be the extreme personalization of the intervention, the professional rigor that does not delegate the evaluation process to others, though known and esteemed, and the existence of a real relationship between those who protect and those who must be protected. For this reason they are perceived as necessary and indispensable, to build a relationship of knowledge and trust, regular and continuous individual meetings with their own social worker or with other professional figures outside the community, such as the doctor or the psychologist.

Nevertheless, the monitoring of the process of upbringing children in institutional care can fulfil its objective – of surveying the safety and well-being of children – only if it surpasses the limits of bureaucratic routines.

Outsider! Clean, strange people, who know nothing about the children's home [should be the social workers, psychologists]. That's it, external people should come in, who would open up the child's world, so that the child becomes free, so that the children wouldn't be confronted with only negative things all the time, and those persons shouldn't listen to the management, to the educators. Their task would be that the child takes their hand and takes them out for a walk, and talk out there, just them, not in the room where the educator would listen, or where the director needs to know about everything. Let rather that expert learn why they wanted to work with the child, and they should earn their trust.'

'Once in four or five months came a psychologist to visit us, so you could hardly talk to them.'

Survivors almost always tell of not having felt seen or heard. Prevention passes from the ability to construct interventions in which children are protagonists and not just recipients, and from the possibility that children can be made more active and aware of their rights through an adequate information and authentic listening.

"In my opinion it should work differently... Not just papers, not just documents, but having the opportunity to talk with the child, with the parents, to investigate, to go into the specific... We are not manuals, procedures..."

"They should use different methods when they do community check-ups. Often when they come they don't even talk to the children, they check if there's food in the fridge, if there are adequate clothes... and that's all. I remember the questions "So how was your day? Are you fine, yes? Great then" My social worker never asked me how I felt, or asked me to really tell something... He should have tried to make me talk, but he was not curious not even a little!"

"... it is necessary to send, within the structures, operators that are well informed... who still manage to keep a very detached professional role (by the managers of the structure). It is necessary to try to make as many visits as possible, because I have seen so few, and do not warn before when there are going to be visits, because inside the structure it was very well known when social workers came, so you knew very well how to create skits... The bedroom was personalized while until the day before it was a 5-6 people bedroom..."

In some interviews at the international level we also find explicit references to the spread of burn out among social workers, and to a training and therefore to a professionalism often not sufficiently solid.

'I would replace the staff as well where needed. That's it. And I would make a selection, for example when applying for a job, no matter where, you need to pass a test. And that test would be much more different than it is now. For example now you need to pass a written test. It would be less important or it wouldn't matter at all. The applier struggles to get a nine or ten. This isn't important. What it matters is that that person should be able to help that child to develop over time, and after they developed that child, at his turn the child should be able to help others.' (L., male, 23)

'(...) The educators should go at least once in a year to a training or supervision, or even to both, where they would be reminded what is it they started to do this work for, and they would be assessed if burn-out occurred, how that could be handled. I think that burn-out is one of the biggest problems.

The need for a greater social and economic recognition for these professions is underlined, as well as a greater awareness of their great responsibility, of the power to affect - positively and negatively - in people's lives. Among the most effective prevention tools we must in fact insert the presence of an adequate training, a constant updating, the possibility of supervising, and the opportunity to compare within a work team.

Almost all the survivors underline the indispensable need of time, to devote to the single child. It happens instead that the operators find themselves working in solitude, with a disproportionate workload, committed to face continuous emergencies in a situation of progressive contraction of the resources and of the tools at their disposal. It is easy to understand how all this, together with the structural deficiency of our system of services, constitutes a fertile ground for the occurrence of

professional mistakes, for the repetition of similar stories...

'I wish to today's generation, to the young people not to be afraid, and especially to the educators to be able to pay attention to the children, 'cause in those times, for us this didn't work, and I wish the educator can spare an hour, some time destined to the child, so that the educator can see that the child isn't doing better, and why doesn't he or she have good marks at school. What's the reason why he or she can't get along with the other children in the children's home or the family centre. If one hour is too much, then let it be half an hour, so that the child can see that yes, I'm a soul too in this house.

'They should pay more attention to the children, and if they assume this job, then they should do it with all their heart, just as if they should look after their own children, for they are together each day, as if they spent time with their own. This should govern their attitude, they shouldn't be there out of a hobby, but of a calling; since that's what they had been studying, how to work with children, they should show how much they liked children. I'm not saying they should show maternal love, but try to pay attention to them, guide them about what is good and bad, how things need to be done, and if the child makes a mistake, they shouldn't shout on him, but support him.'

'More attention, probably, more attention, in the sense that children should be listened to, because that's what they feel, that they are not listened to.'

One of the messages highlights the importance of the support provided for vulnerable families in order to prevent the removal of children from the family:

'In my opinion the families should be supported, so that their children won't get into the system. Child protection should be in charge of this, to protect them inside the family, and this should imply especially the parents, and the children too, and if it's not possible anymore, because many children get into institutions like us who got in from the street.' (M. female,31)

Justice, Compensation, Specific rights

Another central issue: none of the interviewed survivors believe they have had justice for what they suffered. Among those who give this answer there are those who refer to events that have not been subject of collective revelations and investigations and who instead has experienced institutional maltreatments that have been the focus of important judicial proceedings. The widespread and transversal experience of injustice does not change.

Often, they are not even interested in seeking a way to get justice; it seems that there is a general sense of corruption and indifference from the part of the system, which provokes devaluation of Justice and public apology.

This happens for a variety of reasons.

Justice? I do not think I could ever have it in the sense that all the things I've experienced are things that... it's like someone took my arm, a hand, an ear, a foot and justice would mean going back and getting them back, instead it is not like that.

We will never be even

Justice is for me is when one pays till the end.

Life is one, it's impossible to go back, it is not recoverable... There is no justice. They took away my childhood, my innocence... There is no justice

"It's pointless/ nothing can change what happened"

Hence: the disproportion by default of the sanction with respect to the severity and pervasiveness of the damage caused. A damage that is measured not only in terms of suffering and pain, but also in years, in decades taken away, in potentiality robbed and not expressed. A deviation sometimes not recoverable, or not in full, of what could be the path of life, a depletion that could also affect, as some underline, the successive generations. And the thought that the institutions, the State, have been co-responsible for this damage, makes it even more difficult to bear.

A decisive role in making the having justice scarcely possible, is attributed by everybody to a legal institution that, in crimes and in situations of this type, appears particularly odious: the prescription. Each of the interviewed survivors, states without hesitation that it should not exist.

(Prescription) is a big bullshit, I'm sorry to say but... I think it should exist only for much less serious crimes... Because prescription does not exist. My panic attacks are not in prescription. My nightmares are not prescribed. Here we talk about lives, we do not talk about a film. These are real lives.

"Prescription is bullshit. It is not easy to face an abuse... One can go to report it the next day or, as it happened to me, can go after 10 years... Prescription is to turn your back to people and on the other side is to put it in your ass. It does not make sense, it does not have a logical thread."

In the Forteto trial for example, as in many other similar, prescription, on one hand, has prevented many victims from being admitted to the trial as civil parties, and on the other, has allowed many defendants, even of the highest level, to exit the judgment with slight punishments, or with no punishment at all to be served. To date, nobody is in jail.

Justice, moreover, does not recognize the institutional maltreatment as a crime in any of the SASCA project partner countries, nor in the International Conventions, because the qualification is always personal and it only identifies an individual responsibility, never a system responsibility.

Then there is another important issue. We know well that trials sometimes depict only partial responsibilities, but for the victims the distinction between judicial truth and historical truth is understandably very difficult to accept and tolerate, even more so in the case of victims of institutional maltreatment, who have already experienced painfully the lack of responsiveness of the system.

We have already highlighted the reluctance of the system to recognize its responsibilities and deficiencies, even professional, in a context in which professional associations and professional communities are too often absent from the reflection on the failure of the interventions and incapable, or perhaps resistant, to respond to the the need to implement the issue of professional responsibility and the clear need for monitoring and sanctions. This makes even more difficult, for victims, to obtain the justice they want.

"In the idea of justice that I have, if one has to pay for the mistakes he has made, then the State must also pay for the mistakes it has made!"

"It is an outrage that many of those who have committed violence or who have permitted it, known by hundreds of children and professionals, many of them also with coordination or management functions in various health and legal sectors, still work in the child protection system."

Recognition of the omissive and fraudulent responsibilities of individual professionals occurs in interviews at international level as one of the main ways to obtain justice and moral compensation, as well as obvious and basic element of prevention: like dismissals, professional sanctions, fines, criminal liabilities.

There is an important nuance in particular in Romanian interviews: the recognition of professional responsibilities is essential and must be a duty of the system; the survivors must not have to take on the burden of engaging on this a legal battle.

The news that the Justice and Social Affairs Commissions of the Italian House of Representatives voted unanimously for the establishment of a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Forteto case goes in this direction. We hope that this is an opportunity to explore how this story has been built on a pile of complicity, connivance and lies, which in part still persist today. It should be remembered that there are illustrious professionals involved, even though their actions are criminally non-relevant, or not prosecuted because they have been prescribed, who have continued to hold their positions, without any repercussions on their careers, without any conscious and explicit processing of what happened.

This sense of perceived injustice leads us, in the cases of institutional maltreatment, to affirm

the need to adopt a different perspective - **transitional justice** - which consists of judicial but also non-judicial measures - which allows us to think in terms of the survivors' specific rights and forms of compensation, and it is an important leap.

In this regard, a significant majority of interviewed believe that victims of institutional maltreatment have the right to access extraordinary forms of support: from therapeutic pathways, to support in finding a home and a work, to facilitated access to services.

Others underline the importance of being offered moral compensation for the abuses they had suffered. The importance of ensuring moral compensation for the suffered abuses is mentioned in many interviews. Some of the respondents mentioned the public excuse from the State or from the part of the staff of the institutions where they suffered abuse as a form of moral compensation:

'(...) and the first thing, which is very important, that they ask for pardon. The apology... they should ask for pardon to each of them separately.

Providing psychological counselling for those who didn't manage to surpass the childhood traumas is a form of compensation frequently mentioned by the respondents:

This, one who's a grown-up, who's more mature, can help in this, with words. Because just as it is possible to destroy through words, it's possible to build as well.

Some of them do not necessarily deny the support they need but they have not though taken any initiative to request it.

Others say they do not need compensation, or to have been compensated in some way by the fact that they have become a better person than those to whom they had been entrusted; because they made it through, with their own strength and resources.

The adaptation process of some interviewed people actually revealed a history of seeking to fit in and struggle through school, high-school or vocational high-school, eventually higher education towards employment and family life, to become the 'success' cases, hoping for an independent future (Porumb, 2010).

Many also point out that in their experience they were not really able to have access to justice.

Some, for example, who in Italy have laboriously come out from Il Forteto as young adults have told us that they have talked to professionals of various kinds, telling them about the reality they had lived. Likewise, some survivors of institutional maltreatment in religious institutes say they have sought, after a long time, confrontation and comfort from priests, but finding only minimizing answers, or aimed at archiving the facts.

None of them met someone who put them in a position to exercise their rights, to help them understand that what they had suffered was a crime that could be reported to the police.

The interviews also give us the task of structuring a listening and orientation available immediately for the victims of institutional maltreatment, which joins the all-political challenge of being able to recognize and concretely decline the specific rights of these survivors. The Irish experience told in the afternoon and the round table debate will develop this theme.

I never made a clear complaint because I did not know how to do it, not because I did not want to report it... I have been talking to many people, I have testified some things but no one has ever asked me anything and I have never given the answers to questions that have not been asked. Surely if they had helped me to understand, most likely I would have also made a complaint.

I did not have the courage because of my tender age, for fear of not being believed, for the thought of the nuisance I was going to face, how much money do I have to spend to defend myself if they then give me wrong? Are they going to believe me?... if I had known that there were associations that protects you, I would have also taken courage.

It must make us reflect a lot, that the survivors indicate in their close relationships the most

important source of help in dealing with and managing the painful story of which they were protagonists in spite of themselves: friends, their partner, their children. In none of the answers there is a trace of the institutions.

In the moment of greatest difficulty, therefore, they tell of having found themselves again in an institutional void.

Conclusion

The results coming from the analysis of the self-administrated questionnaires and the interviews with survivors confirmed that short and long-term effects of institutional abuses occurred in childhood in residential settings where minors were placed for protection, although similar to those experienced by victims of abuse during childhood within the family, have strong specificities connectable to being first entered and then abandoned there by those institutions that had intervened to protect them. What is particularly interesting in this research is that the population of abused children in residential care has not been studied especially from the adult's point of view.

Interviews reported that the lack of services for ex-residents who have been abused while being in the child protection system represent a significant obstacle in the recognition and the confrontation of the phenomenon. Often survivors are dealing alone with the traumas they suffered during their stay in the institution. Social public system need to take into consideration this population and his specific needs. As resulted from the interviews with survivors, for many there is a lack of access to justice and no recognition of public responsibilities for suffered institutional abuse. The survivors of violence who become adults are left alone with the burden to recognize victimization and to claim social, psychological, legal support.

In all countries a number of recurring themes have emerged:

- the large variety and the severity of forms of violence in such institutions have detrimental and long lasting effects in adulthood, due to the specificities of institutional abuse.
- it is evident that young participants and participants who are still depended on the institution are in a bigger need for support in order to process psychologically their experiences and get independent and socially integrated.
- child victims were subject to multiple forms of abuse;
- the abuse usually took place over a number of years and its extent went unrecognised for some time;
- the interviews, in all countries, confirm that even with respect to the crucial issue of disclosure, being abused in institutional settings is an important factor of gravity and complexity. The disclosure of violence didn't happen because children were threatened, ashamed or didn't know whom to disclose, or if it happened children rarely were listened or their situation became even worse after they filed a complaint; many complaints of child- victims of institutional abuse were not formally reported. Therefore one of the recommendations is the need to build a system of listening to children that could reveal both peer and adult forms of violence and develop ways to handle them.
- several respondents have reported events of physical and sexual abuse committed by peer or personnel, but their complaints were not registered, and not taken seriously, and as such, no measures were taken to address the situation, either because there was a conspiracy to keep allegations quiet or a ready acceptance of the denial by the alleged perpetrator.
- many of the victims of childhood violence were not aware of the possibility to report the violence, not as children, and not later, after they become adults.
- regarding compensations providing material entitlements and access to different supporting services seems to be perceived as the most useful form of compensation for the experiences suffered within the child protection system.

- the liability of the abusive staff and institutional responsibility appears as a form of moral compensation.

Until the present days children's disclosures of violence were not sufficiently monitored and did not become instrumental in eliminating violence from the child protection system, as they were overshadowed by information coming from more credible sources. Whatever investments upgrade its facilities or costly programs are adopted, no institutional care will be perceived as positive unless it offers security from all forms of violence, either coming from adults or from other young people.

We have heard many voices together. Voices, stories, memories, which must remain as a warning.

I think that you should study less on the books and instead learn the profession talking with the grown up victims, because the experience of a victim, due to the choices made by others, is not explained in the books. Only by listening one can really understand. And then I would like to tell you that those who choose to do this work must do it with heart and passion and should not be afraid to report, if one thinks that something is wrong. Yes, you should organize training courses with victims, it is the best way to learn and understand the consequences of connivances or fear.

The fact that the survivors wanted and have been able to put their stories and their opinions at our disposal, so that what they have experienced and the suffering that has emerged can serve to someone else, is an act not to be taken for granted, is an act of great courage and generosity.

It is up to us to collect it not only to nourish the outrage, or even the "pity", but on the contrary to affirm our commitment and responsibility.

Recognizing and assuming the responsibility of the system, like the recognition of their rights, cannot be left on survivors shoulders because, as Alan Sroufe says, "As members of society we share a responsibility for the quality of care available to all children. If the responsibility of the child's well-being does not lie in its innate characteristics, then it is ours".