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The transformative process of the Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the process of the *Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children* in Italy. We first provide an overview of how we worked with the data sets available and reflect on the gaps in the data collection which emerged from the research process. Next, we highlight the understanding of violence from a socioecological perspective by examining the role of structural and institutional level drivers. Finally, we reflect on how the Drivers Study influenced the institutional process of decision-making about policies on violence affecting children as well as the consequences of entering in international networks.

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Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century and up to the present day, Italy has been at the vanguard of policymaking for children, from the legendary early childhood education programmes developed after World War II in Reggio Emilia, to ongoing efforts to adhere to the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which Italy was among the very first countries in the world to ratify in 1991. Since then, Italy has approved legislation on violence affecting children (VAC) in its different forms and it has set-up coordinating bodies and observatories to prevent and respond to VAC. The responsibility for children's policies is located mainly within two different ministries, the Ministry for Social Policies and the Department of Equal Opportunities.

At the same time, Italy is currently undergoing significant demographic shifts which leave no room for complacency. The birth rate has sharply declined, reducing the size of the extended families upon whom this society has traditionally depended for the care of older people and children (UNDESA & East-West Center, 2015). From the 1990s on, Italy has transitioned from a country of emigration to immigration (Di Rosa, 2014), due to an increase of migrants and asylum seekers arriving by sea driven from their home countries by national and international wars and crises. The number of unaccompanied foreign children arriving in Italy on their own increased nearly three-fold from 2013 to 2017, from 6319 to 18,303 with a 45% increase in 2016 alone. (Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2013; 2016; 2017).

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As in other countries, the costs of VAC in Italy are enormous, amounting to some 13 billion euros or 0.84% of national GDP per year, based on data from 2010 (CISMAI, Università Bocconi & Terre des Hommes, 2013). Direct costs attributed to VAC relate mainly to residential care (€163.8 million) and medical expenses (€70.7 for hospital admissions and mental health treatment) while indirect costs include productivity losses for the entire society, amounting to €6.7 billion. In the aftermath of the financial crisis that has hit most of Southern Europe, funding for public services for children continues to be threatened.

In the midst of this complicated landscape, Italy joined UNICEF's *Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children* in 2014 as the only high-income country in the study, showing that no country is immune to the threat of violence in its myriad forms. Italy's work with UNICEF is managed through its National Committee Office based in Rome, with a mandate for advocacy and fundraising for local and largely global UNICEF efforts. The Italian study was conducted from the Istituto degli Innocenti (IDI), an institution with a long history of commitment to children. IDI was set-up in the fifteenth century in order to welcome abandoned children and is currently a research and documentation centre on children's rights as well as a technical body, which supports ministers in the implementation of policies on children.

The following sections reflect on both the process and the results emerging from the Drivers Study in Italy, first addressing the issues and limitations around collecting data on VAC followed by a discussion on the concept of 'drivers' of violence and viewing violence from a socioecological perspective. Finally, institutional outcomes resulting from Italy's participation in the Drivers Study are discussed.

Methods: a reflection about existing and missing data on VAC in Italy

In Italy, the study involved a systematic literature review, secondary data analysis of one national datasets (the 'Vite in Bilico' survey, Bianchi & Moretti, 2006) and an initial mapping of interventions which address VAC in Italy (see Maternowska & Fry, 2015 and the Prologue of this special issue for more information on the methodology). Through these, the Drivers Study identified a large amount of socio-economic and demographic data describing the context in which Italian children live which helped to identify possible factors at the institutional and structural levels that create the conditions in which violence is more or less likely to occur, referred to in the study as the 'drivers' of violence. The review also identified a number of relatively small qualitative studies largely carried out at a subregional level as well as administrative data from the Ministry of Justice, Municipalities, Social Service and others. Very little quantitative (survey-based) data regarding the prevalence of VAC is available. A total of 237 studies were identified in the systematic literature review, of which 67 studies met the inclusion criteria (see Bernacchi, Zelano and Fabis, 2016 for more about the specific inclusion criteria and quality assessment). The studies were largely based on primary research with the exception of administrative data reports or policy reports that included data not accessible elsewhere.

From the in-depth overview of the literature three important 'lessons learned' emerged. First, there is a need for uniform language in relation to national definitions of VAC, as described in the law and as they are used during administrative and survey

data collection. This is a fundamental requirement to allow for comparison over time and between settings. Secondly, quantitative (survey-based) data on violence is mostly retrospective and asks about lifetime violence, making it impossible to determine the prevalence of VAC in a given year. The most important national surveys on VAC, which were used in the secondary analysis, involved women aged 18 and over and asked if they had suffered at least one episode of violence when they were minors (Bianchi & Moretti, 2006; Istat, 2015). There are no large surveys based on interviewing children directly, except for small local surveys and limited school-based studies. This is in great part due to both consenting requirements within Italian law and the fact that parents have generally proven reluctant to give permission for information addressing violence in the Italian context.

Despite such limitations, the retrospective surveys available offer detailed information about the life course from childhood until the point of the interview among adult women, including several variables related to socio-economic and family context information. For the secondary analysis of the ‘Vite in Bilico’ survey (Bianchi & Moretti, 2006), several variables were tested for identifying potential drivers of violence including social isolation, family stress, family size and family constellation – which significantly added to the Italian study.

The availability of administrative data also demonstrates the careful work carried out by the Italian child protection system. In particular, the Department of Equal Opportunities is establishing a database to include all data on VAC – including from police, courts, relevant Ministries and local municipalities – to create a virtual space where such data can be systematically examined. However, this data only includes cases of VAC which have been reported to the police or identified through the intervention of social services. While data on violence will always suffer from under-reporting – and it is often difficult to tease out the degree to which this happens (Palermo, Bleck, & Peterman, 2014) – it is helpful to triangulate administrative data with data from surveys in order to identify possible gaps where victims are less likely to be in contact with formal support structures.

Finally, one of the most important results of the Drivers Study was to assess the relevance of different methods of collecting data. Notwithstanding the availability of databases and survey data on VAC, this study identified some important gaps in relation to data disaggregated by gender, age and other key variables such as migratory status, nationality or ethnicity, or place where VAC occurred. For instance, a very small number of studies investigate the prevalence of VAC among boys. There is also little data about the prevalence of VAC in groups that face specific vulnerabilities such as ethnic minorities, Roma, asylum seekers, refugees, trafficked children and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT). After having presented the characteristics and limitations of the data on VAC, a reflection on which are the most relevant drivers of violence is discussed in the following section including gender and age dynamics.

Results: understanding violence from a socioecological perspective

The Drivers Study adopted a child-centred and integrated socioecological model which helped to understand violence in a more holistic perspective, by identifying drivers of violence at the structural and institutional levels, which are generally less researched

than risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal and community levels. The Drivers Study views VAC not merely as the interaction between a child and one or more other individuals, but as a socioecological phenomenon that takes place within specific social and institutional contexts.

Here we provide a few examples of this new understanding of violence in relation to: discrimination against minority groups, the situation of unaccompanied foreign children, poverty, social isolation and conflictual families. At the structural level, growing socio-economic inequalities, ethnic discrimination against minority groups such as the Roma, and tensions over international migration pose new risks (Camera dei Deputati, 2012; Carchedi, 2004; Save the Children, 2013, 2017). Unaccompanied foreign children, namely those children who are not citizens of Italy or another EU country, and who are in Italy without their parents or another adult legally responsible for them, are particularly vulnerable. In 2016, 6561 unaccompanied foreign children were untraceable (Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2016). Some of them leave reception centres in order to look for a job or to join relatives in other European countries. As they move alone, these children may become vulnerable to the involvement with criminal organisations and/or sexual and other forms of exploitation (Europol, 2016; Save the Children, 2017). A new law on unaccompanied foreign children has recently been approved (Law 47/2017) which aims to strengthen their protection through the appointment of voluntary guardians, the improvement of the availability of family foster care, and defining the procedures used to ascertain their age.

Poor or changing socio-economic conditions, in combination with family isolation at the community level, and conflict within the family at the interpersonal level, creates a high-risk context children to experience physical and/or emotional abuse (Bianchi & Moretti, 2006). For example, children in socially isolated families are five times more likely to experience maltreatment from their parents (Bianchi & Moretti, 2006). These factors are also linked to perpetrating violence (Istituto nazionale di statistica [Istat], 2015; Dipartimento Giustizia, 2014); for example, children who experience physical or sexual abuse or neglect at home are at greater risk of both becoming bullies at school, and being bullying victims (Baldry, 2003; Nation, Vieno, Perkins, & Santinello, 2008). At the same time, recent studies have shown that bullying is a significant predictor of dating aggression (Ellis & Wolfe, 2015).

The study also utilised an age/gender framework which acknowledges that girls' and boys' vulnerability and resilience to violence differs, and changes across the life course. In Italy, this study found girls are much more likely to be victims of sexual abuse (Dipartimento Giustizia Minorile, 2014), while boys are more likely to be physically abused including through corporal punishment (Lansford et al., 2010). Such a finding reflects social and gender norms related to the construction of masculinity and femininity, often aspects of gender inequality - a strong driver of violence.

Crime statistics about sexual violence indicates a much higher percentage of female victims, 75% versus 25% males and a reverse trend for offenders: 99% male, 1% female (Dipartimento Giustizia Minorile, 2014). However, there is little research which investigates boys' experiences of being victims of violence, representing a significant gap in our comprehension of this phenomenon and probably an underestimation of its dimension. Sexual abuse of boys and men is viewed as incompatible with the concept

of masculinity itself. This social construction of masculinity potentially makes it even more difficult for boys to report it and for professionals to address it.

These findings highlight that violence is not only an interpersonal issue, but it is influenced by structural and institutional factors as well as community and family dynamics.

Institutional outcomes

Alongside discovering more about the dynamics and complexity of VAC in Italy, participation in the Drivers Study contributed to a number of institutional outcomes. The study was conducted during a strategic period for Italy when both the National Observatory on Childhood and Adolescence and the Observatory against Sexual Violence and Pornography were in the process of drafting national plans of action. A Technical Steering Committee with members from the Italian Government, led by the Department of Equal Opportunities, provided study oversight and worked closely with team members. Since the Steering Committee was formed by representatives who were also part of the observatories in charge of drafting the plans of action, a rich reflection among Italian stakeholders influenced the drafting process. The Department of Equal Opportunities also played a crucial role in the coordination of both the Steering Committee and the Observatory against Sexual Abuse.

The National Action Plan to Prevent and Fight Sexual Abuse and Exploitation 2015–2017, which includes 10 key policies, clearly draws on findings from the Study, such as the relevance of data collection, the strengthening of professionals, training, and overall monitoring. Importantly, the plan specified not only the need to have a national database on VAC, but also to develop indicators in order to identify groups of vulnerable children and promote longitudinal research to identify risk factors and safeguards. Finally, the Plan emphasises the relevance of monitoring the actions indicated. The Drivers Study also informed Italy's National Action Plan for Children 2016–2017, particularly in relation to professional training, statistics and monitoring, comparative research standards, minimum standards for prevention and protective services.

Another key lesson learned from the process of the study relates to the importance of evaluation. At an 'Understanding Pathways' conference in Bangkok in April 2017, Italy and other countries participating in the Drivers Study came together to develop theories of change based on study results, and to draft concept notes for implementation research to identify and test promising prevention approaches in the next phase of the study. Italy identified bullying in schools as its focus area and IDI, in collaboration with the University of Florence, undertook a mapping of programming interventions related to bullying (Mazzone, Palladino, & Menesini, 2017). The mapping identified more than 300 interventions carried out in the last 10 years to prevent bullying (85 meeting the inclusion criteria) of which only 12% adopted a standardised protocol and only two programmes were evaluated. The Italian government and funding agencies should, therefore, take into account the importance of including an evaluation component in all of the programming it funds as an essential part of learning and improving.

Conclusions

Beyond the results identified in the literature review and the secondary data analysis of the Drivers Study, the process of exchange and interaction among partners participating in the Drivers Study provided a number of key lessons. Results highlighted the importance of involving children in surveys on VAC in an ethical, child-centred way (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013). Related, the study allowed for Italian researchers to engage with other Drivers Study colleagues in Peru, Viet Nam and Zimbabwe – all of whom have engaged children directly in research either through the Young Lives longitudinal studies or in Zimbabwe through community publishing and social norms research. Research involving children is vital for effective violence prevention and response and for ensuring their right to participate in matters that affect them, as recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Italy was challenged in this area by the experience of the other countries in the Study.

Second, the Drivers Study and the exchange it fostered between the other national study sites emphasised the relevance of gender as a social *and* cultural construct and how it affects violence in relation to age and other characteristics, such as ethnicity, migration status, class, disability, sexuality, etc. Specific attention to violence affecting both boys and girls is needed, as well as to how the violence they experience and/or perpetrate changes over their life course. Better understanding of boys' experiences of violence is also needed, and could contribute to broader goals such as gender equality, reduced criminality and more tolerant societies.

Third, participation in the study provided a valuable opportunity for IDI to learn about global networks and web platforms specifically dealing with VAC, such as the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, which Italy is planning to join in the near future in order to continue its commitment against VAC at an international level.

Overall, the Drivers Study provided, for the first time ever, a national synthesis of studies on VAC using an innovative approach based on an adapted socioecological model. Both the process and the products resulting from this nationally-led and data-driven study have helped Italy to identify potential pathways for change and ultimately improve programming and policy to better prevent and respond to VAC.

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