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of the European Union

JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS IN CASES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN: THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCE

COUNTRY REPORT

ITALY

JUNE 2016



cesie
the world is only one creature

Original citation:

LO CASCIO, M., DE LUCA, N., ARDIZZONE, L., (2016) JudEx+: Judicial Proceedings in cases of sexual violence against children – the child’s experience. Country Report Italy. JudEx+

Deliverable A1.4

This version available at: <http://judex.azurewebsites.net/>

JudEx+: Towards a child-friendly justice in cases of sexual violence against children has been funded by the Rights, Equality & Citizenship Programme of the European Union. The authors are solely responsible for the contents of this report. It does not represent the opinion of the EU and nor is the EU responsible for any use that might be made of information contained in it.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are thankful to all the professionals and stakeholders who contributed to the data collection on the child’s perspective of the judicial proceedings in cases of sexual violence against children in Italy, Sicily and specifically in the area of Palermo.

We would like to send our special thanks to all the children and individuals who made the decision to share with us their view and experience of the judicial proceedings. Your participation is a strong message to the judicial system and the political system that will not go unnoticed.

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Introduction

This report gathers the results of the research carried out between October 2015 and July 2016 in the framework of the activities of the JudEx+ project. CESIE – www.cesie.org - is the implementing partner of the project in Italy. JudEx+ is co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Commission, and it aims to improve the experience of children who enter the judicial system when they have been abused. It does so by skilling up the professionals working with children in legal procedures, and by informing the children about their rights and the judicial process in a child-friendly way.

The phenomenon of child sexual abuse is a real social problem with statistics showing the transversal character and the wide dissemination of the violence taking place in Italy and in many European countries (Telefono Azzurro & Eurispes., 2006).

The research and its results in Italy build on studies and actions that deal with the secondary victimization of those who suffer sexual abuse (Biscione and Calabrese, 2003; Scali, 2003; D'Angelo, 2007; Toni, 2009). Secondary victimization is a "condition of further suffering and outrage" that the subject perceives from a deficient attention or negligence of the organizations which are requested to assess the crime and to implement forms of aid, with unexpected negative psychological consequences for the victim (Fanci, 2011). It is well established that "secondary victimization experienced during the judicial processes could adversely affect other areas of the personal and psychological sphere of the victim, such as self-esteem, hope for the future, believing in a better world and in justice" (Orth, 2002).

In the Italian region, Sicily, where the research was carried out, following some extraordinary events of the recent past which sadly hit the headlines (whole neighborhoods implicated and being accomplices in abuse) and as a result of a strong sensitivity developed over the years, the local context is in need of best practices to be adopted and has built over the time a number of inter-institutional agreements, as well as original and interesting intervention models.

The research rationale resonates with these elements, and represents an effort to track down, in a participative way (with operators and victims), the most realistic and sustainable proposals for improvement.

1. Judicial proceedings in cases of sexual violence against children-The case of Italy

1.1 Current Legislation

Legislation of a more general character

- Convention on the Rights of the Child. New York, 20th of November 1989;

- Law no. 176 of 27th May 1991. Ratification and execution of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (New York, 20th November 1989);
- European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights. Strasbourg, 25th January 1996;
- Law no. 77 of 20th March 2003. Ratification of the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights;
- Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child friendly justice, 17th November 2010.

Legislation of a more specific character

- Law no. 66 of 15th February 1996 - Norms against sexual violence.
- Law no. 269 of 3rd August 1998 – Norms against the exploitation of prostitution, pornography, sexual tourism against children as new forms of slavery.
- Law no. 38 of 6th February 2006 – Provisions on the fight against the sexual exploitation of children and child pornography also through the Internet.
- Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, and child pornography, replacing the Council Framework- Decision 2004/68/JHA, which invites Member States to promote awareness-raising campaigns on the topic of abuse and sexual exploitation and to train the professionals working in the field.
- Law no. 172 of 1st October 2012 “Ratification and execution of the Council of Europe Convention on the protection of children against abuse and sexual exploitation (Lanzarote Convention), which substantially modified the Italian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure with: the introduction of the new criminal offences of **grooming** and **aiding or abetting the commission of pedophilia and child pornography**; the additions to the original crime of child pornography of the offences of **corruption of children, management and organisation of child prostitution**, with the aim to combat also crimes like sexual tourism against children; the doubling of the **limitation periods** for the crimes of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children; elevating the **age threshold** of the person offended to **18 years** and extending **the inexcusability of the ignorance of the age** of the victim to a wider range of offences; the introduction of **emotional and psychological support** by experienced professionals as a guarantee for treatment and support for the victims during all phases of the judicial procedure, and also as a way to reduce the recidivism of those convicted for sexual crimes against children. Another important merit for the law ratifying the Lanzarote Convention is the definition of child pornography as “any material that visually depicts a child engaged in real or simulated sexually explicit conduct or any depiction of a child’s sexual organs for primarily sexual purposes”.
- Legislative decree no. 39 of 4th March 2014, adopts the European Directive 2011/93/EU, on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, which substantially modifies the structure of the Italian Penal Code in relation to the crimes about the abuse and the sexual exploitation of children by worsening the **punishments** and introducing a new

set of **aggravating circumstances**, as well as specific provisions for the prevention of such crimes, e.g. allowing employers to access criminal records of their employees and future employees.

As the role of Ministerial Circulars, of the internal regulations of the institutions involved and of the protocols of the Local Authorities who directly work with the victims is rather crucial in concretely enforcing the laws, it is useful to refer to some of the documents that regulate the practice in the territory where the research has been carried out:

- The guidelines of the Sicilian Region “Planning multidisciplinary interventions of healthcare services dedicated to the protection of Childhood, of the victims and of the children at risk of violence” (D.A. no. 560 of 23rd March 2012 published in the GURS no. 17 of 27th April 2012);
- SINPIA guidelines (Italian Society of Neuropsychiatry of Childhood and Adolescence) about the abuse of children – revision approved in the CD SINPIA on the 15th of February 2007;
- CISMAI guidelines (Italian Coordination of Services against the Mistreatment and abuse to the Childhood) “For the clinical evaluation and the activation of the recovery of parenting skills in the psycho-social path of children”;
- The Memorandum of Understanding between the Municipality of Palermo, the Local Health Authority of the Province of Palermo and the Regional Education Office of Sicily on the interinstitutional responsibility of children victims of abuse and maltreatment in the city of Palermo.

1.2 Legal definitions related to child justice

A substantial difficulty exists in defining exactly what sexual abuse to the damages of younger people means, yet surely every statement is related to two contexts: the juridical-judicial side and the clinical one and the psycho-social intervention. In the face of multiple forms and categories in which the abuse appears, law provides a compass for professionals, as every action, treatment and procedure related to children victims always depends on what defined by law. The national legislation related to the sexual abuse of children is made up of a set of laws and articles of the Criminal and Civil Code that – based also on the legislation in a European and international environment – aim to protect the child and indicate sanctions for the perpetrators.

The main reference for such crimes in Italy is certainly law no. 66 of 15th February 1996 (titled “Norms against sexual violence”) that has changed the status of the crime of sexual abuse from that of a crime “against public morality and decency” to a crime against the individual. Law no. 66/1996 has also introduced the crimes of sexual violence (art. 609 *bis* of the Penal Code), sexual acts with a child (art. 609 *quater* of the Penal Code), sexual acts in the presence of a child (art. 609 *quinquies* of the Penal Code) and multiple-perpetrator sexual assault (art. 609 *octies* of the Penal Code). In particular, art. 609 *bis* of the law defines the abuser as “whoever, with violence or threat or through the abuse of authority, forces someone to do or undergo sexual acts”; the article adds that the crime is even more severe if the perpetrator takes advantage of the status of physical or psychic inferiority of the victim, or if the perpetrator deceives the victim by pretending to be someone else to gain their trust.

Under a more strictly clinic profile, sexual abuse is considered as the involvement of a child by a dominant adult partner in sexual activity not necessarily characterized by explicit violence, to which the minor cannot freely consent due to the age and the leading position of the abuser. Sexual exploitation of a child or adolescent, child prostitution and child pornography are also encompassed by the definition.

On the matter of defining abuse, it is important to note that, while in the past such definition included a wide range of acts distinguished into “abuse by contact” and “abuse without contact”, later on many authors agreed that the following definition of sexual abuse against children would be preferable: “any approach or action of a sexual nature that involves a child and/or causes him/her any inconvenience, uneasiness or psychological suffering”. Such definition allows avoiding reference to the multiple aspects and forms of the phenomenon, and it also underlines that direct physical contact is not a necessary characteristic of sexual abuse, therefore marking as an offence also the display of sexual interest for a child and the seduction by the adult. After all, we know that the majority of the abuses occur within interactions that are set up and maintained in the context of strong and meaningful relations. As a matter of fact, abuse is more frequent at psychological level when a relationship is in place, which allows the abuser to exercise his/her power and control.

And still about definitions, it is important to refer back to the Lanzarote Convention (Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, 2007), whose article 18 identifies the sex offender as someone “a. engaging in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities; b. engaging in sexual activities with a child where: – use is made of coercion, force or threats; or – abuse is made of a recognized position of trust, authority or influence over the child, including within the family; or – abuse is made of a particularly vulnerable situation of the child, notably because of a mental or physical disability or a situation of dependence”.

In order to shed light on the holistic understanding of abuse, the abovementioned Law no. 66 of 1996 specifically aims to safeguard the physical and also psychological integrity of the individuals exposed to aggression and sexual violence. In this sense, the choice made by the legislator was to introduce a definition of a unique hypothesis of crime denominated “sexual acts”, thus encompassing those cases where there is no physical contact between the victim and the abuser. Among the advantages of this law, we identify:

- making the crime of sexual abuse and sexual violence an offense against the individual rather than one against public decency, thus recognizing that personal freedom is seriously jeopardized through the act;
- granting particular attention to the children because of their psychological and physical immaturity, of their inability to freely and consciously express consent, of their inexperience, as well as because of the highly damaging consequences of abuse for their well-balanced and harmonious process of growth.

The focus on the fight against the sexual exploitation of children in Italy was addressed by law only some years later, with Law no. 269 of 1998 on the “Exploitation of prostitution, pornography and sexual tourism against children as new forms of slavery”. Through the abovementioned law, the following crimes were introduced: child prostitution (art. 600 *bis*), child pornography (art. 600 *ter*), possession of child pornography material (art. 600 *quater*), tourism initiatives aimed at child prostitution (art. 600

quinquies), and child trafficking (art. 600, par. 2), which, together with the crimes related to the use of new technologies and of the Internet, seem to be exhaustive, for the time being, of all the types of offence related to sexual abuse of children.

1.3 Stages involving child's participation

Reporting the abuse: who can report and to whom

The Italian law considers two options as a condition for legal proceedings on the matter: a private action of reporting (e.g. by the victim), or the beginning of the criminal proceedings by the public authority regardless of the existence of a private action.

c.1) In the presence of a private action, the individual who is a victim of "sexual acts" needs to report the crime to the relevant authorities within 6 months of the offense. If the victim is a child, an adult will most probably report the crime for the victim.

c.2) Otherwise, all civil servants who, while on duty or because of their service, have had notice of a crime such as that of sexual abuse against children are required to report the crime by writing, even in the case where the persecutor has not been identified (art. 331 of the Code of Criminal Procedure). The professionals falling in the category of civil servants are, for instance, judges, public service officials, teachers of public schools, but also teachers of private schools, community educators, doctors and professionals of the public healthcare service (psychologists, social welfare officers, educators, etc.). Those civil servants who will not abide or who will report a crime with substantial delay will be persecuted by law. With the aim to safeguard the integrity of the investigation and of the evidence, Italian law does not allow the initial reliability assessment of the reported crime.

In both of the abovementioned circumstances (c.1 e c.2), the fact must be communicated to a Criminal Police Officer or to a Public Prosecutor: if the supposed offender is an adult, the communication goes to the Public Prosecutor; if the supposed offender is a minor, the communication is received by the Public Prosecutor at the Juvenile Court.

General process of the cases since the report

For the alleged sex offender:

- If the alleged offender is a minor, a case file is opened at the Public Prosecutor's Office for Minors and the investigations are initiated;
- If the alleged offender is an adult, a case file is opened at the Prosecutor's Office and the investigations are initiated;

For the minor victim of the reported violence:

When the report is made, a file is opened for the child at the Prosecutor's Office at the Juvenile Court, civil division. The next steps in this formal process are:

Reporting

A report is filed to the Local Authority Social Services for:

- social and environmental assessment;
- possible activation of psycho-social support with the competent departments;

A report is filed with the Juvenile Court (Article 609-*decies*) for:

- a decree on the proxy to be carried out for the child and his family;
- a possible removal from the family unit and the context the victim belongs to when the threat of violence is considered persisting;
- an interview with the child or other persons by the people involved in trial activities and psycho-social intervention: Judicial Police, Judges, Lawyers, experts for consultations and hearings, Social Welfare Officers, Operators of Healthcare Organizations;
- collection of information from the parents or others who are deemed significant in relation with the criminal offense;
- possible appointment of Technical Experts by the Court;
- possible appointment of a special guardian.

The decisions are taken in private by two professional judges (magistrates) and two lay judges (not magistrates) who must be selected among a group of experts in relevant subjects (psychology, pedagogy, neuropsychiatry, etc.).

When we talk about hearing the child or interviewing the child, it is important to mention the regulations with reference to the article 336 *bis* of the Italian Civil Code, which prescribes that the child "capable of discernment" should be heard by the judicial authorities but if the hearing is contrary to the best interests of the child, or manifestly unnecessary, the judge must not proceed to the fulfillment by giving a motivated act order. Always following the rule of law itself, the hearing is conducted by the judge, making use of experts or other auxiliaries. Parents, even when they are parties in the proceedings, representatives of the parties, the special guardian of the child -if it is already appointed- and the Prosecutor are eligible to participate in the hearing if it is authorized by the Court. Topics and themes can be proposed by the judge before starting the performance. Before proceeding with the hearing, the Court must inform the child about the procedure and about the effects of the hearing.

[Acts and main systems of protection provided by law](#)

Due to the particular vulnerability of the victim or potential victim, a series of actions are put in place to act as physical, psychological and social protection and assistance for the child. These include also the provision of accurate information about what is happening and what will be the next steps to follow.

Especially in the judicial system, the judge must allow children who have been victims of abuse to give their testimony in accordance with the arrangements that guarantee an adequate level of protection from the very first moment, for instance outside of the hearing and before it takes place (arts. 2, 3 and 8, no. 4 of the framework decision of the Council of 15th March 2001, 2001/220/JHA).

Briefly, the main aspects of protection in the procedures in Italy are the following:

1) Assistance to the child:

Emotional and psychological support for the minor is assured, at every stage and level of the proceedings, by the presence of the parents or other eligible persons designated by the minor and accepted by the judicial authority. In any case the child is guaranteed the assistance of the Administration of the Juvenile Justice Services and of the Services set up by local authorities. (Art. 609 *decies* of the Penal Code, Law 66 /1996).

2) Protected interviews:

Considering the emotional trauma and the risk of secondary victimization that any questioning or interview of the child inevitably brings about, in Italy “the examination of the child victim is carried out, at his request or his lawyer’s, through a glass mirror and on an intercom system” (Law 269/9, Art 13 *4-ter*). The child is placed in a room where only one expert, who supports the judicial authority in formulating questions that are tailored to the age and competences of the child. Any other person that can be present for the interview according to law provision will wait in the adjacent room and listen to the interview through a glass mirror or watch it through a screen¹.

3) The non-repetition of questioning and the use of the same video recording made during the initial phase of evidence acquisition;

4) A claim to provide training for staff and operators who for various reasons will meet the child²;

5) The placement of the child in a Residential Child Care Institution, whenever deemed necessary to ensure the physical and psychological integrity of the child;

6) Periodic supervision of Residential Institutions by the Prosecutor of the Juvenile Court, in order to monitor and evaluate the effective capacity of these institutions to be safe and welcoming places for the children who are placed there;

7) Some good inter-institutional practices are implemented in some territories; in fact throughout the country for years now there is a widespread awareness of the need for an inter-institutional child care and protection; this is well reflected by the long-standing work of CISMAI (Italian Coordination of Services for Children against Abuse and Maltreatment), which, as a multidisciplinary association, collects concrete experiences of intervention and facilitates their dissemination among relevant agencies. Also the local authorities in Italy have been active in this matter, for example through official guidelines on the protection of children from maltreatment and abuse (through memorandum of understanding all over the Italian regions of Abruzzo and Umbria, for instance), as well as through the setup of formal networks working together to face the complexity of the phenomenon of sexual violence (as in the case

¹ It is useful to briefly recall that in the Lanzarote Convention there is explicit reference in this direction when it is stated that: a. interviews with the child take place without unjustified delay after the facts have been reported to the competent authorities; b. interviews with the child take place, where necessary, in premises designed or adapted for this purpose; c. interviews with the child are carried out by professionals trained for this purpose; d. the same persons, if possible and where appropriate, conduct all interviews with the child; e. the number of interviews is as limited as possible and in so far as strictly necessary for the purpose of criminal proceedings; f. the child may be accompanied by his or her legal representative or, where appropriate, an adult of his or her choice, unless a reasoned decision has been made to the contrary in respect of that person. Moreover, interviews with victims or, where necessary, a child witness, may be the subject to an audio-video recording, and such recording may be admitted as evidence in criminal proceedings, in accordance with the internal law.

² Also in the Lanzarote Convention, the signatory States are invited to “ensure that training on children’s rights and sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children is available for the benefit of all persons involved in the proceedings, in particular judges, prosecutors and lawyers”. (Art. 36)

of the municipalities of Trieste and Genova). Considering that the research of the JudEx+ project in Italy has mainly focused on the territory of Palermo, it is useful to mention the Memorandum of Understanding between the Municipality of Palermo, the Local Healthcare Authority and the Regional Education Office for Sicily which promotes an inter-regional team (each made up of a social worker, a child psychiatrist, a psychologist and a social worker from the healthcare authority, and psycho-pedagogical workers) as the best practice and multidisciplinary care, protection and support for the improvement of the judicial process through these services (see Annex). Moreover, it is important to mention three institutions present in the Italian territory, namely the “Centre for the mistreated child and the care of family crisis” (in Milan), the TIAMA Centre and the Study Centre “Hansel and Gretel”, which for decades have been struggling, practicing and preparing specific training, with a strong scientific production, about a complete and multidisciplinary care within systemic and ecological models of intervention.

8) Interview in the presence of experts.

For the interviews with the child victims, whenever the police or the Prosecutor require information from the children - whether they are victims or even just witnesses in crimes related to sexual abuse -, they should always be assisted by an expert in psychology and child psychiatry. The expert's appointment is to be made by the judge.

9) The appointment of a special curator responsible for informing the child about the procedure in accordance with the principle of “best interest of the child”. One of the curator’s specific tasks is to provide explanations and information to the child who can understand them (European Convention on the exercise of children’s rights, ratified by Law no. 77/2003).

10) The possibility to carry out the Court hearings without public³;

11) The provision of a technical defense (though not automatically allowed) for the child in order to communicate with the other parties in a Court hearing and with the judge.

The following section offers a summary of the results of the research carried out in Italy in the framework of the JudEx+ project.

The results gathered through two different tools, i.e. the focus groups with stakeholders and the interviews about the experience of the victims, are presented separately, in order to highlight the differences and commonalities in the different points of view (the stakeholders’ and the victims’). An overall reflection has to try to combine all of these points of view, to develop a model of understanding for the complex interactive and systemic dynamics. By doing this, the results of the research can offer guidance when identifying possible integrations and alternative actions linked to a more child-friendly justice.

³ We recall the provisions of Article 36 point 2 of the Lanzarote Convention: “Each Party shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure, according to the rules provided by its internal law, that: a. the judge may order the hearing to take place without the presence of the public; b. the victim may be heard in the courtroom without being present, notably through the use of appropriate communication technologies”.

2. Stakeholders' perspectives on the child's experience

“We need to avoid the reinforcement of pain”

“Our task is to give back to the child an understanding and meaning of the traumatic event so that he can accept it as part of his identity and of his personal story”

(quotes from the focus groups with stakeholders)

2.1 Focus Groups: Contextualisation

Between May 3rd and 4th, 2016, two focus groups were organized and led by CESIE staff at the Organization's premises in Palermo, as foreseen by the project activities. Both saw the participation of a wide range of professionals (judges, deputy public prosecutors, lawyers, child neuropsychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, educators and directors of child care institutions, police, psycho-pedagogists from schools, etc.) and institutions who, in different ways, work with abused children, and who know each other because of their joint efforts and interlinked tasks. Both focus groups were characterised by an open attitude of the professionals and a collaborative atmosphere, clearly a sign of their willingness to contribute to bringing about change in the sector.

The interprofessional and interinstitutional dynamics of the work of the participants may have threatened the achievement of the goals of the focus groups. However, the participants responsibly chose to focus on the content of the discussion. Apart from their views as collected during the focus groups, another important result emerged: good practices and occasions for interinstitutional discussion are plenty and for many years now have been regulated by different sets of memorandum of understanding which fruitfully lay down the methodological guidelines for child protection.

2.2 Gaps in Practice

- Justice and care move at a different pace. This is sometimes exacerbated by the gap between the work of the institutions and the actual needs of the victims. The latter would need to be assisted periodically in a way that can help them heal (Malacrea, 1998);
- The pain of the victim is worsened, in the stakeholders' view, by the fact of not being informed about what happens to the offender (especially if the offender is an adult) and about his psycho-social and judicial path;
- There is a lack of a common language among the professionals involved in the protection of the child and it is acknowledged that the victim would benefit highly from a better communication between such professionals. Gaps in inter-professional communication and understanding should be bridged;
- Apart from the actual abuse, the reporting and judicial proceedings can be damaging for the victim and the need of the victim to be compensated in different ways is not met. This leads to feelings of frustration and anger.

2.3 Needs

- **A better child protection should be “distributed”, interprofessional and inter-institutional**, as agreed in the memorandum of understanding and as the stakeholders have been trying to achieve. It is for this reason that, in the city of Palermo, a network of professionals is active and benefits from a rich experience in the field. Moreover, the formal network involved in the memorandum of understanding is highly inter-connected and in communication with other institutions and organizations working towards the protection of children (e.g. Project “Armonia”) and cooperate even with institutions taking care of child offenders (e.g. the EOS group of the Office of Social Services for Children).
- **The concepts of child/minor and of childhood** culturally embedded in the work of the professionals influence their work on the abuse, even at judicial level. The word “minor” (and the related mainstream idea that is still widespread in Italy also at professional level) relates to the word “minus”, as if children and adolescents were somewhat “reduced” individuals. This leads to an attitude towards “protection” and “provision”, rather than participation. Judicial proceedings and hearing procedures may highly benefit from a conception of the child as an active individual, able to speak and think. It would definitely give way to a more equal recognition of the child, granting him control over his own life, while at the same time maintaining his role as a victim that needs to be protected (this should be decided on a case by case basis, considering the wide gap in capabilities in the age range 0-18).
- The victim is an individual whose world and context has been completely disrupted and devastated, someone in need of assistance. An **assessment and evaluation of the damages and of the needs of the victim** should therefore always precede the provision of support and of a clear and continuous flow of information to the victim. This approach would allow limiting the confusion brought about by the violence and by the great number of professionals, places and procedures that the victim will deal with once in the system.
- Some of the elements identified by the stakeholders were the **need to be believed** (which is jeopardized by the several interviews, usually perceived by the victim as a clear sign that the “adults” do not believe them), the **feeling of injustice** (for example due to the removal from their everyday life, while the offender is allowed to live his life as usual), the **painful experience** of the abuse and the **inability for emotional connection** that require psychosocial support (De Cataldo Neuburger L., Gulotta G., 2004).
- The **need to maintain the investigations confidential** and the **need for a prompt protection of the child** by the Juvenile Court were both identified as paramount by the stakeholders, especially in cases of abuse perpetrated by a member of the family or where the crime may occur again. There is however a risk that the need for a fast action of protection may not allow the collection of the evidence necessary for the proceedings against the adult abuser.
- Italian law (through articles 609 *bis*, *ter*, *quater*, *quinqüies*, *sexies*, *septies*, *octies* and *nonies*, as redefined by Law no. 66/1996) recognizes a wide range of abuse and does not differentiate specifically for all of them according to the age of the child victim. This brings about advantages as well as disadvantages for professionals and victims. For the wide variety of crimes of abuse (the same law covers abuse in the form of hand play as well as penetration), the age range 0-18 years old, and the extremely different situations and conditions of the victim and of the crime (sexual abuse can be perpetrated by a family member or by a stranger, for instance) the law is necessarily not detailed and rather vague. The advantage of the law of being rather comprehensive is challenged by

a disproportion between the charges, the punishment and the crime (for both minor and adult offenders) and, on the side of the judicial authority, it is met by an objective difficulty and subjectivity in determining the extent and quality of the response in relation to the crime actually perpetrated.

2.4 Recommendations

The interest of the professionals who participated in the focus groups is also confirmed by the numerous opinions and ideas shared for the improvement of the practices at all levels of action (policy, legislative, operational, educational, cultural).

The stakeholders believe that it would be useful to:

- 1) **Invest in the efforts and procedures aimed at an efficient collaboration between the regular Court and the Juvenile Court, as well as the two Public Prosecutor Offices.** Apart from allowing to shorten the proceedings and improve their quality, this would be rather beneficial for the wellbeing of the victims;
- 2) **Assigning the roles of protection and regularly nominating a special curator/guardian** to support, accompany, guarantee, and orientate the victim in the path in the judicial system, from beginning to end;
- 3) **Establishing a “fast lane” in the Courts prioritizing proceedings related to crimes of sexual abuse,** as is already the practice for Mafia proceedings. This would make proceedings quicker, which would be overall beneficial, considering the high specificity and severity of the cases, as well as the high probability of recidivism;
- 4) **Better defining roles and tasks of all professionals and institutions involved,** enforcing specific boundaries in order to avoid bad management of the cases, conflict, confusion and the general inefficacy related to bringing justice to the victims.

In order to achieve what is stated above, there is a need for:

- integrating the psychological and the social support;
 - setting up stable teams of professionals who can, in time, develop a shared experience and effective practices;
 - identifying one professional from the team to become a reference point for the victim, a case manager;
- 5) Especially for the psycho-social support, it is important to: **be clear and honest with the victim, make them feel that they are not alone, changing styles and approaches depending on the age of the victim, acting in a comprehensive dimension, stating clear opinions that are shared for the whole team, finding a good balance between the need to carry out a good evaluation of the case and the need for prompt intervention,** especially in situations of high risk and danger for the victim;
 - 6) Setting up **permanent training opportunities for all professionals.** This is especially requested in order to:
 - Activate a shared approach that looks holistically at the person;
 - Develop a shared language;
 - Learn to manage frustration, limitations and failure in this line of work;

- o Be able to welcome the feelings and experiences of the victim, be able to understand the disarray violence leads to, resort to empathic competences, welcome the exchange of knowledge and experiences, dissipate conflict and the defensive attitude of the victim toward the system and the professionals (Acquistapace, Milani, 2005).
- 7) **Developing projects about awareness-raising, training and prevention in schools**, which are the places where the signs of abuse are often uncovered. It is at school that discomfort and unease are detected; the school often initiates investigation, files a report and has the advantage of being familiar with the needs of the victim;
 - 8) **Establishing ad-hoc places within institutions and the territory** where victims can be heard. Some offices have been found inadequate and even damaging, for instance in the case of the ordinary Court;
 - 9) Providing **adequate and timely psychosocial support for the family of the victim and of the perpetrator**, going beyond the mere assessment of parenting competences (Cirillo, 2011);
 - 10) Setting up **evaluation processes and supervision for the performance and work of institutions and professionals**. This would be achievable also through the **full enforcement** and regular monitoring of **memorandum of understanding** and other agreements of collaboration signed by institutions.

3. The child's perspective of the judicial proceedings

"I hope that this interview to be of support and encouragement for all those young people and children who are still suffering and have not had the strength to report the violence"

(quote from one of the victims we interviewed)

3.1 Interviews: Contextualization

Between May and July 2016, researchers at CESIE carried out eleven interviews with victims of sexual violence and abuse, and with the professionals who worked on sexual violence cases in Sicily.

The interviews with the victims of sexual abuse unveiled a hidden and invisible view on the experience of children involved in the judicial system (the lack of literature on their perception is striking). However, the research also unexpectedly represented a way of (at times cathartic) channeling experiences that needed ad-hoc outlets to be communicated, listened to, and disseminated to communities and policy-makers.

This is proved by the gratitude shown by the interviewees at the end of the interview sessions.

As expected, due to the sensitivity of the subject and of the often ongoing proceedings, it was rather difficult to identify the victims and to get their availability for interviews.

Thus, in the first stage of the research, researchers resorted to the support of the professionals, who helped them identify adult individuals who had experienced sexual abuse when children, and whose proceedings were concluded in the first degree of judgment.

In the second stage of the research, aiming to collect the testimony, even if indirect, of the victims, professionals who worked cases of child abuse were interviewed.

As far as the interviews with victims are concerned, three females and one male accepted to share their experience of judicial proceedings with us; they had all turned 18 a few months before and they are all from Palermo.

Three of the cases were related to child sexual abuse by a family member, while in one case the perpetrator was a person close to the family of the victim. In all of the cases, the abusers were convicted and the victims received support, in different forms and times, from the services and from the child care institutions where they were placed. The proceedings lasted between 18 months and 4 years. One victim has been living in a child care institution for 11 years and has been lately involved in the judicial system for a compensation related to the abuse.

The social contexts of original belonging of the victims were disadvantaged in the four cases researched and the sexual abuse perpetrated was oral and anal, and it was repeated in time (even for 4 years). In one of the cases, the perpetrators were more family members, or they were witnessed by other family members, who did not intervene to stop the abuse.

Currently, one of the victims still lives with the family; one has chosen to continue living in a shared apartment; the male victim is living with his partner and they are expecting a baby.

Informed consent was acquired prior to the interviews, which were conducted and recorded at the premises of CESIE, in a comfortable room, without any interruption. One of the interviewees chose to be interviewed at a childcare institution.

Interviews with the professionals working on cases of child sexual abuse were recorded in a questionnaire that included the questions from the interview guidelines. The seven professionals who contributed to the research are managers responsible of residential institutions for children victims, social welfare officers, psychologists and a lay judge for a Juvenile Court in a Sicilian municipality.

The experiences reported by the professionals are of seven victims, two boys and five girls, who, at the time of the abuse, were between 7 and 14 years old. One case was about two siblings, a boy and a girl. All cases were of sexual abuse perpetrated by a close family member: the mother's partner (two cases) and the father (five cases), together with a member of the larger family in two cases.

Three of the cases ended with a guilt verdict, while the proceedings of three cases are still ongoing and have lasted between 8 months and 3 years. One of the cases, prepared for 3 years, did not make it to trial for the person of interest, the father of the child. The duration of the proceedings of the cases that are concluded is not known. As of today, none of the children have gone back to their family of origin. The two siblings and one girl have been adopted, while the other victims are hosted in a child care institution.

The gaps in the practice, needs and recommendations resulting from the interviews with the victims and with the professionals are summarised in the following sections.

3.2 Gaps in Practice

- **Feelings of fear and terror** emerge, especially in the first periods following the abuse, because of the direct or presumed threats perceived by the victims, and a related **feeling of insecurity and of being at risk**. The victims often presume that if they were to be removed from their families, they would have to live all their lives in a child care institution (which in the beginning is perceived as one of the biggest pain);
- Although being supported for the full duration of the judicial proceedings, the victims complained about great suffering and panic attacks due to the traumatic experience of the abuse, as well as other difficulties, for example related to speech;
- **The victims reported of not feeling fully informed about the proceedings**, especially about the different steps they would take in the judicial system. Moreover, some of the victims complained about **the lack of information about what happens to the perpetrator after the reporting step**, which is especially painful when they still see he is free. The situation is clearly perceived as being worsened when the family of the victim continue *“brainwashing”* them, unstopped and not even being sanctioned for it. Panic is likely to become the most shared feeling inhibiting any other function whenever the victim is not aware of the results of the proceedings and of the sanctions decided for the offender. Victims live in the constant fear of retaliation and of further violence. One of the victims reported having kept on living in the same house as the abuser, the father, in the year following the reporting, and that the violence continued in that period. Beyond the memories of a very young victim, which can be confused after a long time, the perception of alarm and constant danger is high in the victims of this type of violence;
- Even when the information provided to the victims is sufficient, the **language** used by the professionals is often **inadequate** for the age and level of comprehension of the child;
- The **lessening of the resources and support provided to the victims after a first stage** is received as a recoil and a further *“victimization”* and betrayal of the promises made, linked with the risks, the courage and the pain experienced after the reporting;
- **Multiple changes are experienced, such as the loss of reference points** (friends, school, etc.) when the victims are removed from their family (which is one of the forms of secondary victimization). Other reference points, also institutional, are acquired by the victims: *“I’ve had many people next to me in this path”, “exceptional people have been assisting me”, “they always put me at ease”*;
- **The feeling of disillusion and frustration with the judicial system** perceived by one of the children whose case was rejected by a court-appointed expert, in spite of the opinion of the psychologist of the child in question;
- The interviews showed a failure in finding **foster families and adoptive families** for the victims, a very delicate point which would need further research;
- **Disorientation and restlessness** result from moving from the family home to the child care institution, but at the same time the removal from the family is found important to get away from the dysfunctional and violent environment.

3.3 Needs

The following points were registered as needs during the interviews:

- The **priority perceived is that of rebuilding trust**, even in the professionals working in the judicial system, in order for the victims to be able to tell about their unspeakable experience (*“[it was hard]*

to understanding that beyond that desk, in that chair, there were people who wanted to help me. With time, I let go”);

- One of the needs expressed is to **allow the victim the appropriate (and inevitably long) time to overcome the traumatization**, together with deep work on themselves;
- The importance for the victims **to see change around them, concrete changes in the people and the contexts where the violence occurred** (Ciulla and Lo Cascio, 2013). Processing of the violence risks being neutralized by fear and the constant threat. *“If the adults are the ones doing wrong, why do they remain out there, free to go anywhere, and to live their lives, start new families, have more children, and I have to be inside a child care institution and fear that I might meet them when I am out?”;*
- The crucial point is that the **damages suffered are many, visible and invisible, severe and distributed on many dimensions of the personal identity of the victim** (*“my self-esteem...I was not speaking anymore...”, “it demolishes you physically and mentally”, “I could not accept my body anymore, I thought all of my thoughts were wrong, that it was my body’s fault, that I was my own problem”*). Other consequences are often overlooked, especially regarding the context of belonging: for example the unease and the violence suffered fuel a sense of being “dirty” and “different”, dragging the victim in a whirl of further uneasiness (they become victims of bullying in the relationship with peers, relational isolation within the family, etc.). In some cases, all speech abilities were erased – this was also exacerbated by the nearly inevitable aggressive behavior of the victims towards relational contexts which was further worsening the already existing issues. Such severe repercussions in their lives are partially overcome after years of psycho-social support. Perhaps the most damaging consequence is the inability to “be” with people and to “be” with themselves (*“for years, I’ve known nothing about myself”*), to resort to the relational resource which is the only real element of growth and human evolution. The relationship with the “masculine” is especially damaged and filled with malaise, misunderstanding, paranoia;
- **The action of re-telling the violence over and over is especially painful and it is a source of misunderstanding, as highlighted** in all interviews. It is perceived as a constant return to the traumatic events of the past and does not meet the need to open up to a new life condition. Nevertheless, the ways of the interview about the violence and the clarity of the stated objectives are fundamental factors that influence the way the interviews are perceived, even when faced with the fast and unavoidable changes that follow the violence: *“I felt at the mercy of a tornado”, “my life changed all of a sudden”;*
- The difficulty of talking about the abuse with **many adults, in non-familiar contexts and inappropriate environments** is yet another critical point. The research registered the need of the victims **to connect with the adult** to whom they will consign their experience, as well as the need to open up to a **favourable condition** to talk about the crimes suffered;
- The general need for protection and for removal from the violent context;
- The need to receive justice, which is sometimes not met, as in the cases where the children’s accounts of violence are not believed.

3.4 Recommendations

The interviewed victims and the professionals gave very punctual and rich recommendations for both institutions and professionals working in the field:

- 1) **Providing safety and serenity, showing coherence with the judiciary responses, becoming reference points for the victims even after the end of the proceedings:** *"they were people I could trust and on whom I could lean any moment", "they all gave something and they are all very important to me", respecting the normal times of "relational opening" that are different for each child, and avoiding an invasive and stressing approach "because the person may shut down";*
- 2) It is necessary to **impose higher and proportional penalties to the offense** even if **the only sanction is not enough and the guilty must be followed;**
- 3) **The more useful described process** is articulated following this sequence: investigations made in short time, social workers as reference from the very first moment, express assignment to the Community, identifying any foster family (if it is necessary), inclusion in a stable psychological path that acts as balance;
- 4) **The victim needs to be heard and make him/her to attend the hearing, whenever it is requested.** It would seem important for the elaboration of experiences -although it could be painful- to see the offender and his attitude (more or less changed or regretted) even in the moment of the process (*"even to speak my mind, and in these years I was not absolutely allowed"* and the consequent feelings of not listening, carelessness, and inattention);
- 5) The user should know immediately **the reality and the truth of the prospects** that are opening up for him, depending on various assumptions and developments in the court case. In this sense it is vital, among others, the role, tools, skills and abilities of the victim lawyer;
- 6) **Never change the key figures throughout the judicial process:** the judge, the psychologist, the social worker, the residence communities, etc.. Also services such as "Telefono Azzurro" have important results both for a more gradual impact in the revelation of the violence and due to its 24/7 accessibility;
- 7) **Judges must meet the victim with a verbal and non-verbal respectful attitude**, and only after reading the file, giving her/him attention with reasonable listening times. In this sense, the conversations with the representatives of the institutions are reprimanded if are perceived as fleeting, little careful, routine, superficial, always the same, (*sometimes "does not personify", "you do not give importance" "I felt useless, my case for you is not important?"*). Then produces malaise that *"gave confidence to those who were mentally unstable and not to a child"* (the most classic of secondary victimization);
- 8) The fact of sending out the child from the family must take place only **in appropriate community** (for infrastructure, capable of responding to emergencies economically, welcoming - *"that makes you live properly"* - with stable operators that do not go away because this "is something heartbreaking") ; and a victim concludes: *"because if someone has never felt care, he/she expects to feel it where he/she will go..."*. The community, however, is seen as a place where it can be found answers to some indicated needs : *"need for security, trust, to be understood, to have confidence in myself, to be loved"*;
- 9) There are required **two central figures who act as constant reference points:** the figure of the responsible for the community and the figure of someone who follows you from the start to the end (a victim described it as "intermediary" - especially for the little ones - who always follow

- you). Also confirm the importance of psychologists and experts in the preceding moment and during the inquiry phase, considered a time of extreme hardship and stress;
- 10) Improving the cooperation among the different institutional actors involved in the cases, providing for a prompt hearing of the victims and a continuous supervision of the implementation of shared procedures by all actors;
 - 11) Improving the overall evaluation of the cases, preventing any situation of PAS (Parental Alienation Syndrome), assessing the potential recovery of parental skills of the possibly protective parent, and finally increasing the human resources for the protection of the victims and their psycho-social support;
 - 12) Creating a "**Fund for Victims**", as for other types of crime and offences, so that children, with no more bearings or families (lost as a result of the complaint and the subsequent judicial process), can at least be supported in the difficult process of empowerment and reintegration into a social and productive society;
 - 13) The victims are keen to give some **suggestions** to other people who unfortunately live the same situation: telling peacefully the truth, talking with someone as soon as possible (at school, with friends, etc.), understanding that judges and community are "external but close", always ask to explain what may happen, always walk with your head held high, have the courage to express yourself in other backgrounds (school, community, etc.) the real reasons for your discomfort. People interviewed are those who urge prevention and early listening of abuse signals, indicating with more or less similar words some of the indicators which are found in literature: discomfort in various contexts, loneliness, isolation, eternal return to the traumatic experience, feeling of alienation in presence of peers, unrelatedness, inability to be honest, inability to concentrate on their studies, direct aggressiveness;
 - 14) An advanced request where it can be found **prohibitions and interdictions even after the end of the sentence**. It would mitigate some of the fears that undermine the serenity of the victims, especially in cases where the offender continues to profess himself innocent, does not do any rehabilitation process, and has not been able to take upon himself the burden and the responsibility for which he was sentenced. In these cases, says a victim, they can only get out of prison even worsened and "more angry";
 - 15) Keeping in mind the fundamental role of the school in prevention, identification and reporting of abuses, as highlighted by the Regional Education Office in the Memorandum of Understanding for child victims of abuse and mistreatment in Palermo.

Conclusions

The overall image that emerges from our study is that of a working reality where there is no need of new regulations or radical changes, although some proposals are certainly pointing towards a more "structural" modification. The point is not to invent "special effects" but to apply properly and consciously what it is expected, supported by the will of various political, economic, cultural and administrative powers.

Any change would be benefit from a fruitful interaction between: a. real resources made available to victims, operators and territories; b. implementation of the Memoranda of Agreement with related

systems for monitoring and independent evaluation; c. initial and ongoing training of all stakeholders and operators (Arcidiacono, Palomba, Salzano & Ferrari Bravo, 1999); d. greater courage in setting up these systems and arrangements for the best interest of the child. It is not enough that protection and care are offered to the victim by a professional. It becomes ineffective if the entire judicial system that the child victim “is confronted with” does not become holistically focused on the welfare of the child, beyond the dynamics of administrative and political powers.

However, it is also comforting to have found a substantial convergence of views between victims and operators, although with different characterizations and emphases due to the different roles played in the judicial scene. Operators, beyond the obstacles and difficulties of implementing the best practice, show a deep awareness of the aspects that are important for the success of the proceedings and for the psycho-social treatment of child victims. Finally, it is worthwhile to note how many of the answers go exactly in the direction advocated by the guidelines on child-friendly justice (“Guidelines of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on child-friendly justice”, 2010), and how they especially align with the principles of “participation” of the child at every stage of the proceedings, his “best interests” (in terms of psycho-physical, legal, social and economic), the respect for the “dignity” and physical and psychological integrity of the child.

A child-friendly justice implies “the right to know”, the ability to ensure adequate information and advice, holistic protection and support, material and psychological security, trained professionals and multidisciplinary approaches. More specifically, the obligation to speed up the procedures emerges, as well as the need to create adequate physical and procedural settings, which do not place additional stress on the child, the need to allocate appropriate funds to carry out research in this field, and finally to support the sharing of relevant information for the political and judicial intervention.

Therefore, it is highly recommended that a special attention is directed towards the improvement of the settings and places where the victim is heard or hosted, that new “training packages” are introduced and research on child-friendly justice is supported, mainly focusing on granting direct voice to the victims and, on the more technical side, on the investigation on how to mediate between the powerful need for affection (from the victims’ side) and the inevitable professional posture that in several cases imposes “distance” and a certain detachment, though certainly not in terms of indifference and lack of empathy.

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Annex

Scheme of judicial procedures in case of crime of sexual violence on children

