

The field of children's rights has improved immensely in Portugal and around the world, in all truth children were up until recently their parents' property, then young outcasts in the streets and finally, when institutionalized, the State's responsibility. In the beginning of the XX century, both the proclamation of children's rights and of the child's best interest, were the result of the birth of different social movements and a new scientific approach to infancy, which positioned the child at the center of human rights history. Portugal signed the Geneva Declaration in 1927, and judicial and social protection for children systems were developed all over the world as a result (*in* Tomé, 2018). Then, the UN Convention for Children's Rights was ratified, this was in 1990..., 30 years ago..., so, we raise the question now – what is still left to do in the specific context of Domestic Violence?

What are the main concerns that we still hear at the shelters, at the service centres?

_ Women and children who continue to be abused during contact days..., children that verbalize not wanting to be with their father and despair before and during visitations day;

_ Mothers who insist their children have to go to visitations because they are afraid of being accused of parental alienation and being penalised by the judicial system;

_ Women who dared defending their children's best interest not complying with an inappropriate visitation regime and are now criminally responding for this;

_ Also regime visits fixed with mandatory supervision and children and mothers' protection being neglected because, in that space, every family should have the same treatment... the fact that in this family (as in others) a crime was committed (hence the need for supervised visits) is overlooked;

_ Children still not recognised as victims of domestic violence under the law – and not granted with victim status - when it is now common knowledge that children exposed to violence are already being victims of psychological violence and have higher risks of developing humor or anxiety disorders, substance abuse, academic problems, amongst others.

_ Children that continue to be not heard in family processes, where decisions are taken that directly impact their lives, to protect them supposedly, to not retraumatise them, yet these same children then being inquired in the crime processes.

It's also intriguing that when we sit down to talk about all of this, the examples that we are given are unrelated and are actually situations where the man is seen as the abused and the woman is the abuser or the alienator, which is not what we find in our day-to-day practise at all.

In face of such evidences relating to difficulties of communication and misunderstandings, we understood the urgency and need to call upon children and young people to speak. This was how UMAR applied to the IJCC project, along with CESIS, in order to find ways to join children's rights with women's rights. With this mission in mind, UMAR and CESIS invited the Gender and Equality Commission as well as the National Commission for the Promotion of Children's Rights and Children and Young People's Protection to support our application. We recognised the pressing need to open up a participatory space for children and young people, a space that has been consecrated for a long time but not that exerted really. We can clarify misconceptions, prevent

crime repetition and in some cases the death of children, young people and women and their relatives, just by hearing what children and young adults, victims of domestic violence, have to say.

Improving Justice in Child Contact is therefore born of this will and curiosity to implement participation models and methodologies that would respond to children and young adults survivors of domestic violence situations, hearing them out and collecting their opinions on how the judicial system could improve in order to better listen to them, to better serve them as citizens of the Portuguese society.

How was PU-PD introduced in Portugal?

The Power up-Power down methodology was first introduced at our multistakeholders forum. We presented the methodology in this group who was formed by many institutions that worked either with children or with adult victims of domestic violence. It has been very positive to have institutions that don't usually communicate or work together, discussing their views on how children's rights could be improved in the field of domestic violence.

After we completed the translation and adapted the Power Up/Power Down methodology to the Portuguese context, we started to contact children's support workers at the shelters, after that mothers and children, and with their consent we had set up the base for our work.

We were then able to proceed with an incredible group of (5 elements) boys and girls aged between 7 and 11 years old.

Six Power Up-Power Down sessions were held at "Universo D", a space dedicated to children and young people's rights, which belongs to Lisbon City Council. We introduced a 'Session Zero' as a preparatory session delivered by the technicians at Universo D, who gave us an introduction to the space and carried out their "Children's Rights Journey" activity – a 'trip' through some of the most important articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was a good moment for the group to become acquainted not only with the space, but with us and with each other too.

Before starting, we discussed some very important information with the children: our Golden Rules about safety and confidentiality, the end of the project date, evaluations, the setting – which included safe spaces to take a break and a microphone that children could use to speak their minds.

Over the project, there were many activities that the group responded very well to – such as the 'Power Bag', where the children discussed what power means to them, and the 'Power Line', where the children discussed how much power different people in society have, positioning them on a line from the Super Powerful to the Powerless.

We invited the group to make changes to the storyboard and children gave us their feedback making many suggestions. The group was also invited to think about ways to ensure that children are better heard in courts. They identified some important characteristics in the Grace character, the Super Listener: (she) «Wears colourful clothes»; «Is funny»; «Is somebody who understands what is being said»; «is somebody who can communicate how a person feels to the

right people»; «Pays attention». You can check all the results online in our website (<http://ijcc.umarfeminismos.org/>).

The Young Expert Group – a 2nd participation model

After implementing the Power up – Power down methodology, we started to compose another group of young adults – we invited five young men and women who had previously experienced domestic violence in their lives and who had been in contact with the judiciary system, be this either at criminal or family (contacts) proceedings. The group's mission was to become the advisory panel for our project – they were invited to discuss, support or reject some of the actions that were being implemented or are yet to be implemented by our stakeholders. They are called the Young Expert Group and some of their suggestions touch upon the following:

_ the need for children to be heard in legal proceedings and, at the same time, to feel safe and comfortable;

_ the need to have professionals with a specialized background and profile, able to empathize and understand children in their context and developmental stage, giving them the opportunity to express their views;

_ often children don't feel safe, saying that they don't know what is going to happen to them as well as not fully understanding the information provided to them.

In cooperation with the Young Experts Group, we set ourselves to the task of contributing to improve the judiciary system in a way that children and young people in the context of domestic violence could be heard... We started by having three (in)formative sessions, we talked about many subjects like human rights, rights of the children, violence, power, participation, citizenship, portuguese judiciary system, national network for domestic violence response.

The groundwork for the system mapping exercise was set – we invited our YEG to think about how the system works, how the different institutions work together, what connections are working, which aren't: they pointed out how lawyers seem to have a lack of training on domestic violence and also how the education system seems to be so far away from the children's family.

In the meanwhile COVID 19 happened and we continued our sessions virtually!

Afterwards the group changed the storyboard, they reflected on how important it would be to have every professional trained on Domestic Violence, to have the child's testimony recorded for future memory, a child friendly room where children can communicate with the judge via video links, amongst others.

And finally we got to the Super Listener character. We had time to discuss with the group who their Super Listeners were in their lives and what their attributes were (caring, patient, someone who takes in the good parts and the bad parts of another person, were some of these); Our young experts also suggested it would be SOOOO important to have a Super Listener both at the school as well as in our health care centres; this way children wouldn't be dependent on

their parents to get this service..., Also they came up with the idea that we could even label these places with this special characteristic, something like – “this is a super-listener school”...

Regarding difficulties/solutions... It was challenging to implement the PU-PD methodology in just six sessions. We believe additional sessions need to be introduced, particularly with the children beforehand to get to know each other.

Having 2020 been the 30th celebration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we think this might have helped the implementation of some of the project’s actions. We think this fostered a particularly beneficial political environment for some of our stakeholders to engage.

Stakeholders’ engagement has been great, but translating this into concrete and effective action has proven to be a challenge. Even with many struggles, the multistakeholders forum was very active and engaged with the goals of the project, in some cases bringing forum recommendations to their organizations.

Regarding the Impact of PU-PD/YEG on organisation and roles...

We had a lot of interest shown by some members of the multistakeholders forum who showed a more urgent need to implement some of the measures included in the action plan of their specialities.

The project is enabling networking and reinforcing liaisons between institutions – police forces, social security, ministry of justice, amongst others. We have witnessed these relationships connections form in the multistakeholders forum.

Our strategy in Portugal, besides meeting with stakeholders in the forums, was to meet with them in bilateral meetings; we made ourselves available to meet with the partners that showed interest in continuing some of the steps identified in the action plans. We think this is a really good practise because it was during these moments that partners were more receptive to think about each of them, each other and changing their practises.

We believe this is just the beginning of this journey!

Some references:

Rosa Tomé. Promoção e Protecção. Lisboa: Centro de Estudos Judiciários, 2018. Disponível na internet: <URL: http://www.cej.mj.pt/cej/recursos/ebooks/familia/eb_PromocaoProtecao2018.pdf>. ISBN. 978-989-8908-26-1