


Why Didn't Anyone Understand? Why Didn't Anyone Ever Stand in the Way? Detecting Child Abuse in Out-of-Home care Setting: The Role of Safeguard and Protection Systems and Social Workers

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Abstract

The issue of institutional abuse (IA) in out-of-home care services is a difficult one, which we struggle to think about and which is slow to find attention and recognition: the victims are those children who, after experiencing maltreatment and abuse in the family, still suffer violence in the residential care services that should protect them. It represents the failure of the public system in protecting children, and it is often the result of institutions and professionals who allow, collude, cover, justify and minimise violence against children. Starting from a recent and paradigmatic Italian story and from the contribution of experience and thought of those who, as the first author, survived it, as well as from the analysis of the existing literature, this article examines the specific characteristics and dynamics of IA that motivate the extreme difficulty of its emergence. This article aims to improve professionals' awareness concerning the phenomenon and their responsibilities in the prevention and early detection. For professionals and services to see institutional maltreatment implies questioning

themselves, their own methodological tools and their own professional practices, as well as opening themselves to the concrete possibility of being able—at least—to make serious mistakes.

Keywords: child participation, institutional abuse, out-of-home children care, survivors

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Introduction

Institutional abuse (IA) refers to all forms of maltreatment perpetrated within the institutions towards people who depend on them for different reasons (Daly, 2014a). It occurs when people under the care of the state suffer violence and traumatic experiences, for which the state is directly or indirectly responsible. The story of Il Forteto is a story of very serious IA, in that specific form that concerns out-of-home children and youth who, after having suffered maltreatment in their families, are still subjected to violence in the residential care system that should protect them. The maltreating nature of the life rules adopted in the Il Forteto residential childcare community is proved by two final judgements of the Court of Florence in 1985 and 2020, which ascertained the ‘repeated and systematic damaging acts that violated the fundamental human rights’ (Judgment of First Instance, Court of Florence). Hundreds of victims are directly or indirectly involved in this case: more than eighty out-of-home children and adolescents, their original families and about sixty adults with disabilities. For more than thirty years, political, institutional and professional negligence have made possible the violence that no one has been able to detect.

This article is part of a broader process of participation and advocacy on IA, initiated in Italy by a group of people placed at Il Forteto during their childhood and by professionals working alongside them in clinical, social and research interventions. This process aims to foster the emergence and prevention of this specific type of child maltreatment whilst shedding light on its dynamics.

The author (G.A.) was placed at Il Forteto at the age of ten years, and he emerged twelve years later, denouncing the maltreatment that was being carried out there. His personal experience is integrated here with the results of participatory research conducted within the European project Support to Adult Survivors of Child Abuse (SASCA) in Institutional Settings, which is coordinated by the anti-violence centre Artemisia. The SASCA project favoured a comparison of different experiences related to child maltreatment in residential care and involved a wide partnership of public bodies, universities, third-sector organisations and associations of victims in Italy, Ireland, Greece and Romania. In total, 101 survivors participated in the research.

The Italian sample consisted of thirty-three participants recruited by snow-ball sampling through associations and non-formal groups of IA survivors. The participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire and scales assessing the psychophysical aftermaths of trauma and responded to a semi-structured interview about their own story of IA.

This article expands the scarce literature on IA with thoughts that have emerged across various contexts in the process of participation that has progressively connected the IA survivors with the system of services and especially with social workers. The Committee of Minors Abandoned by the State at Il Forteto (CMASF), of which the first author is the spokesman, is now acknowledged as a stakeholder by the professional and institutional world. It promotes and participates in conferences and trainings for professionals in the child protection field and helps in the recognition of maltreatment perpetrated in residential childcare services. The CMASF has been consulted for periodic reports to the Italian Parliament for the implementation of laws/regulations for child protection and out-of-home placements. In Italy, out-of-home placements are decided by the Juvenile court, whilst the activity of control and support are entrusted to the Territorial Social Services. Provided this task of social services, the CMASF has also participated in consultations with the National Board of Social Workers to revise the procedures under the control and protection functions of social services, to promote specialised skills among social workers and to call for legislative changes to prevent IA.

Among the many professionals working in the child protection system, social workers have been among those who have better grasped the value of the participation of the former children placed at Il Forteto, to interpret what happened in the view of a prevention approach that is careful of the children who are now the subject to out-of-home and protection measures. In Italy, Il Forteto and similar stories have enhanced the reflection to amend and reorganise the law establishing the social work profession (Law 84/1993) and to adapt academic training programmes. The challenge is to make the professionalism of social workers increasingly present and efficient in the welfare system.

Recently, a considerable increase to the workforce of the Territorial Social Services has been planned. Professional supervision has become compulsory, with the aim of supporting practitioners and helping them to explicate the processes underlying their choices, as well as to highlight problems and alternatives of intervention. These steps intervene structurally in reducing the risk for practitioners to do harm. For the prevention of IA, they should be accompanied by a massive awareness raising and training campaign for practitioners.

The story of Il Forteto

The Agricultural Cooperative Il Forteto was founded in 1977 by a group of young people aged between eighteen and twenty-five years old, led by

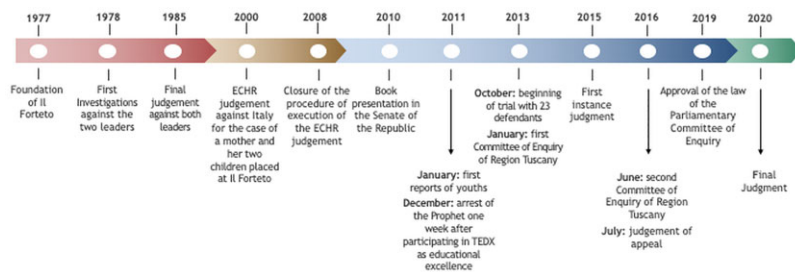


Figure 1: Timeline of the story of Il Forteto.

an older man who called himself the ‘Prophet’. Besides being an agricultural cooperative dedicated to animal farming and to the production of cheese, it also housed minors with physical and mental disabilities or with a history of family hardship or abuse. The young founders broke up with their families of origin, which they considered the cause of their sorrows, in line with the Prophet’s thought. They invested all of their savings in the project, quit their jobs and sold all their possessions (Figure 1).

Gradually, seriously abusive rules began to emerge, which remained the pillars of life at Il Forteto until 2011. Men and women were strictly separated; no heterosexual relationships were allowed and all emotional relationships were hindered, even among brothers and sisters who were separated within the community. Family bonds were systematically sealed; mother–child bonds were distorted and perverted; women were completely devalued and demonised as detrimental for men; maltreatment and public humiliation were perpetrated daily as a tool for conditioning and controlling people. The most loyal community members were rewarded with a temporal immunity to otherwise mandatory punishments. The practice of ‘clarification’ (i.e. the public recounting of one’s supposed thoughts and fantasies) was imposed and used to explain how present behaviours were conditioned by past events. Sexuality was the interpretive key to all behaviour, attitudes and expressions.

When they saw their offspring suddenly turn against them, the natural parents of the children at Il Forteto made the first complaints that led to a final conviction against the Prophet and his right-hand man in 1985 for mistreating an eighteen-year-old girl with disabilities and for sexually abusing the two young boys with mental disabilities in the presence of a thirteen-year-old boy. For the first time, the rules for mistreatment at the core of the doctrine of Il Forteto emerged, which were confirmed more than thirty years apart by the final judgement of 2020.

The conviction of 1985 was, however, considered a judicial error attributable to the political ideology of part of the judiciary and

disregarded. To rehabilitate the Prophet's reliability, the president of the Juvenile Court fostered a child in his care. Later on, this was the alibi to keep on fostering dozens of children at Il Forteto. Until 2011, over eighty minors were entrusted to the members of the residential childcare community, which meanwhile increased its economic power and became an undeniably important agricultural business entity. Over time, institutions have granted Il Forteto blind trust and complete freedom of action and of decision making for the children in their care.

There were, however, some quite evident oddities. The rate of school drop-out was nearly 100 per cent. No child was supported in continuing their studies, neither by the members of the residential childcare community nor by the social workers. For the childcare community, it was a way to strengthen the bond of dependency, prevent the minors' autonomy and retain an unpaid workforce. For the social workers, it was obvious that the children had no ability to be autonomous and have a future in the outside world because of their traumatic past. Once grown up, almost all of the former children remained in the residential childcare community.

Another unheeded warning sign was that soon after being placed in the residential childcare community, children started reporting abuses that they had never reported before. For thirty years, many children systematically denounced their parents for complicity in sexual abuse or prostitution. Many innocent parents have been unjustly convicted and have served prison sentences. The maxi-trial concluded in 2020 shed light on the vexatious manner that led to those false accusations aimed at severing all ties of the child with the outside world.

Meanwhile, in 2000, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) condemned the Italian State to compensate a mother and her two children placed at Il Forteto. It claimed that the leaders of Il Forteto had 'the same criminal records for which the children had been removed from their family of origin' and that they had 'contributed to delay and obstruct the meetings between the mother and her children'. The judgement described the vicious circle that had arisen among the juvenile authorities of Florence, the local socio-psychological services and the Agricultural Cooperative Il Forteto, which was making all this possible. Despite such evidence, Il Forteto became the outstanding educational model in Tuscany: they published books with prestigious publishing houses, organised conferences and hosted prominent politicians, show business figures and academic professionals. They even presented a book in the Senate of the Republic in 2010.

It took a new trial related to maltreatment to shed light on the Prophet's Community. In 2011, legal complaints started the investigations of the Public Prosecutor's Office of Florence and in December 2011, the Prophet was arrested. Only then were the children's placements at Il Forteto permanently interrupted. In 2020, the Court of Cassation issued

the final judgement for crimes ranging from maltreatment, sexual abuse, psychological violence and private violence. A parliamentary commission of inquiry is currently underway to ascertain the institutional and professional responsibilities for this case.

The dynamics of IA

The phenomenon of IA in residential childcare communities began to be recognised from the 1970s to the 1980s, together with increased attention to the rights of the child and the laicisation of foster-care institutions. The acknowledgement of IA as a social problem was triggered by its survivors' narrations that allowed it to be 'named'. Since the 1990s, several scandals of abuse in institutional settings have been investigated by national governments in Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Ireland, Finland, Germany, New Zealand and many other countries (Wright, 2017; Wright *et al.*, 2017). Despite the conclusion of the deinstitutionalisation process in some countries, the problem of IA against out-of-home children has not yet been overcome, nor can it be circumscribed to a past time (Daly, 2014a).

Since the 1970s, starting with the story of Il Forteto, several common dynamics have emerged that highlight the need to look over the single episodes and the single authors and to focus on the larger system underneath IA. The extant literature and the commissions that have reconstructed the facts throw light on several recurrent dynamics of IA, such as silence and connivance, with a tendency to pander to the institution in question; frequent awards, despite evident malfunctions; delayed interventions in response to formal complaints; lack of vigilance, unrequested authorisations and unsent periodic reports; a generalised tendency to absolve, minimise and not denounce the shortcomings; an over-fragmentation of responsibilities; the absence of gatekeepers of the rights of the child; the low credibility of the victims; frequent assertions about the existence of worse accommodations, about the lack of alternatives and about the need to recognise the value of the willingness to house 'human wrecks'; and the inability of the system and services to use the tools offered by the law (MLPS, 2022 b).

IA in residential childcare services cannot be reduced to the single prosecutable acts of the direct authors of physical, psychological and sexual violence. The context of institutions and services that collude, minimise or culpably fail to understand is also responsible (Gil, 1982; Wolfe *et al.*, 2001). Extant research consistently agrees on IA being more severe than other forms of child abuse for its impact on the survivors (Carr *et al.*, 2009; Magalhães *et al.*, 2009), because it is not attributable to the occasional conduct of a single practitioner, but is configured as a systematic and organised circumstance that lasts over time. The ease of

access to children, as well as the power and authority that the abusers exert over them, helps to establish a dynamic that literally holds children in a trap. The psychosocial impact on the survivors is exacerbated by the sense of ‘institutional betrayal’. The institutions play a role and concur in enabling and failing to detect the abuse, as well as in making the victim accessible to the abuser (Higgins, 2002; Morrison, 2005; Parkinson *et al.*, 2009; Smith and Freyd, 2013).

Given its characteristics and dynamics, IA is particularly difficult to detect. Social, health and judicial workers must remember to consider it among their hypotheses. They need to be able to cultivate doubts that help them to think of the unthinkable (SASCA Project, 2019b). In the following sections, we focus on the possible courses of IA in the protection and residential care system and on how it perpetuates and eludes detection.

Removal and out-of-home placement

Albeit painful, the choice of removing children from their family of origin is sometimes necessary. It should represent a step in the protection project, in which the children and their vulnerable families could actively participate. On the contrary, in the case of Il Forteto, the children’s removal from their families was taken as the end of the protection project. It was taken for granted that children and youth were safe in the residential childcare community. This lack of doubt or overconfidence took its toll on more than eighty minors.

The way the removal is managed tells a lot about the approach that the institutions and their practitioners have towards children. At least, for me it was so. It was a brutal, confused and emotionally strained approach that made me immediately turn away from the operators, rather than getting closer. Over time, this distance turned into a deep-rooted mistrust that undermined the whole course of protection. This mistrust contributed to weave the net that imprisoned me and many others, preventing us from telling what we were suffering. During the removal, we found ourselves terrified and lost in a car with unknown people, who were driving us in an unknown place, to other unknown people, in the name of the protection that we needed so badly. No one explained to us why or for how long we should have stayed there and when we could have met our parents again. I asked questions, whose answers were merely false reassurance: ‘keep calm, we are going to a beautiful and safe place where you will be fine’, a sentence repeated over and over again that often led me to think that if I did not feel as good as everyone expected, then it was all my own fault. . . . (Aversa, 2021, p. 5)

Survivors underline the importance of recognising an approach that is willing to outline a shared project starting from the phase of removal:

‘Let’s see how you feel there: if anything does not work, we will find a solution together—you are not alone, we are there for you’. It does not mean delegating the whole assessment of the out-of-home placement to the child, but rather keeping an open door to confrontation. On the contrary, in the stories of IA, children often had the impression that the practitioners were getting things over quickly as they were in the best place on earth and the villains were outside (MLPS, 2022a). In the story of Il Forteto, in the turmoil of the removal, the children could not differentiate between lawyers, social workers and psychologists in the absence of adequate explanations that the practitioners did not bother to give. The clarifications of the protection system were provided by the members of Il Forteto, who explained from the inside of the residential childcare community who these professionals were and what they did, and suggested what the children should say and how to tell it.

Information was instrumentally distorted by the members of the residential childcare community, bolstering deep feelings of isolation, of being different and of not belonging. This is a recurrent core dynamic in IA in residential childcare services. Children are often confused, angry, frightened and their self-esteem is low (Page and Clark, 1977). This emotional vulnerability is exploited by the physical and sexual abusers of these young people, often destroying trust and creating fear, including shame (Stein, 2006). The typical imbalance of power that always characterises the relationship between an abused child and maltreated adult is raised to its highest level. It is almost impossible to imagine being believed and asking for help. There is no adult to look up to: No one sees, no one understands. There is nothing left but to think that what is happening is right and that it must make sense if there is no protection from it (Sasca Project, 2019b). The belief of being worthy of nothing else, of not being worthy of love, is intertwined with the belief that what is happening is deserved: ‘I was beaten by my parents first, and then by the leader of the residential community...because I was a little bastard’ (Sasca Project, 2019b, p. 3).

At Il Forteto, as in many of the residential childcare communities subject to international commissions, there was an unconditional willingness to accommodate children with terrible histories without unnecessary bureaucracy and free of charge. Because they welcomed ‘human wrecks’ (Guidetti Serra and Santanera, 1973) or ‘scraps’—to quote the horrifying expression of the president in charge of the Juvenile Court of Florence from 1998 to 2004 (Commission of Inquiry Region Tuscany, 2016)—they seemed to offer a solution to what was seen as an intractable problem: the care and control of some of the most difficult children and young people in the care system (Stein, 2006). Because their availability was so convenient to all, everyone seemed to forget that foster-care was carried on outside any legal or conventional activity.

The attack on the self, the breakdown of families and the demonisation of the outside world

The narrations of many survivors of IA in out-of-home placements across different times and countries recall the characteristics of total institutions, such as the dispossession of one's 'identity kit', the imposition of degrading, contaminative exposure, the disruption of the usual relationship between the individual and their actions and the restrictions on self-determination (Goffman, 1961). A recurrent theme is the systematic undermining of individuality, which, on the one hand, is subject to a process of homogenisation and, on the other hand, is publicly blamed and ridiculed. Meanwhile, the rupture of all meaningful emotional, familial or friendship bonds is continuously pursued, both inside and outside the residential childcare community.

Everything is marked by fear of authority and of the arbitrariness of adults. Children are separated by age and prevented from talking to each other, especially between siblings and peers of different genders (Daly, 2014b). Children cannot have personal belongings nor anything belonging to their past. They are prevented from receiving communication or visits from their family. All these are characteristics of closed, total institutions that facilitate maltreatment through the imposition of a secret: everybody knows, but no one talks. At Il Forteto, children could not see other alternatives for their lives, except Il Forteto itself. No alternative suggestion was made by the institutions, the social workers, the psychologists or the judge. Children were subjected to the emotional blackmail of 'We love you, if...', when nothing was stronger than their need to feel loved. This increased the extra power of the members of Il Forteto on the children placed there. 'I had that feeling inside me that they were something too big, for me to be able to tell anyone what I was suffering' (Sasca Project, 2019b, p. 13).

Whilst the active prevention of all contact with their families of origin, the children placed at Il Forteto went through a systematic distortion of their personal histories, up to the creation of accounts of false crimes meant to cut all ties with the families themselves. As adults, many of those children have been able to reconstruct what happened at Il Forteto and have described the physical and psychological violence daily used as persuasion techniques to induce false narratives (Aversa *et al.*, 2021). These false claims further decreased the natural parents' credibility in contrast with the prestige of the institutions like Il Forteto. Their behaviours were described to the children as a desire to take them home to maltreat them and to take advantage of them, rather than as a desire to repair them. Whatever they did or did not do was reported to the child by the members of Il Forteto and by the social workers with the worst possible interpretation.

Nobody explained to me why our parents behaved as they did, nobody helped me understand them. There was only a push to look at the shortcomings and a constant endorsement of my anger. No one helped me to reason out loud, by asking me questions without providing answers too, or connecting those behaviours to a lack of personal resources, helping me to recognise the affection that my parents were trying to express nevertheless in their own way. No one ever tried to give different explanations for the mistakes my parents were making with me. The social workers only ever told me that it was normal that I was getting angrier and angrier: I felt so because of my parents' behaviour. (Survivor, personal communication, 2022)

Whilst it is clearly functional to safeguard the control that enables the abusive behaviours in the abusive setting, this analysis of IA emphasises that the professionals outside the community behaved in the same way. Over the years, judges, prosecutors, mayors, social workers and national and local politicians all received letters of claims from many of the families of the children at Il Forteto. Some of them even pointed out the unsuitability of Il Forteto, whose leaders had been condemned in 1985, and requested that their children be moved to another residential child-care community. Most of these communications were addressed to the same places: the institutional figures around Il Forteto were always the same. In fact, every warning sign was eluded, silenced or actively rejected as persecutory against Il Forteto.

The polarisation with the families of origin, the automatic alliance, the blind trust towards Il Forteto and the negation of all doubts paralysed the operators who did not carry out the necessary assessments and monitoring. The prejudicial identification of the families as the ones responsible for the child's suffering completely diverted attention from the children themselves. Instead of scaffolding the children, they all contributed to jeopardise them. Meanwhile, the children could not rely on any adult to establish an authentic relationship and tell them what was happening.

Controls and monitoring between positive prejudice and absence of impartiality

In the course of the history of Il Forteto, it was taken for granted that the children were fine: it could not be otherwise. This positive prejudice against Il Forteto is compounded by the absence of impartiality ([Commission of Inquiry Region Tuscany, 2016](#)), which invalidates the control function and sometimes crosses over into a complicit familiarity among the social, health and judicial workers around the minors.

We were youths, children, but it was impressive for us to see all those official state cars in the square where we usually played. We knew that

some representatives of the institutions did their shopping for free, or received Christmas or other gifts, including construction works of any kind, or their children were helped to find a job, perhaps within Il Forteto itself. Even if we did something forbidden in front of the Police, living at Il Forteto was a sort of pass for us.

The ECHR judgement against Italy in 2000 seemed to have barely scratched the impenetrable shell of positive prejudice towards this place, but it ended up with nothing except perhaps having demonstrated to us the unbeatable nature of this social experiment. (Aversa, 2020, p. 9)

IA is unlikely to emerge during control and monitoring visits as these are insufficient both in quantity and quality. The narratives of the survivors tell of pre-announced visits (so the community had the chance to prepare and choose what to show the outsiders) that were often superficial or even replaced by telephone calls. Confidentiality was not granted to the dialogues with children—indeed foster carers were often present. In the story of Il Forteto, the evident signals that some children were sending through provocative behaviours were never caught because it was taken for granted that they derived from the suffering experienced in the families of origin. No one ever suspected that they could be attributable to present problems. There was always the presumption that what they were experiencing was what they needed to recover from their past trauma.

The children and the different professionals around them never shared continuative relationships of trust. Children never perceived an authentic interest, beyond the formal one surrounded by routine questions. No one was ever interested in knowing the children's desires and their aspirations:

I remember questions like 'So, how was your day? Are you fine, yes? Great then' My social worker never asked me how I felt, nor did he ever encourage me to tell anything at all... He should have tried to make me talk, but he was not even the least bit curious! (Sasca Project, 2019b, p. 16)

If the operators take protection for granted once the minor has been placed in a residential childcare community and that they do not keep it in mind as a goal that needs to be monitored, they do not make room for doubts nor for their verification. They are thus likely to schedule formal meetings that do not allow them to become aware of an unhealthy environment because they probably find what the members of the community or foster family want them to see.

A further consequence of this sort of superficiality towards the child protection project is the condemnation to an experience of total uncertainty. Children are stuck in a wearisome wait, surrounded by a frightening silence that makes them feel alone in out-of-home abusive situations. An unanswered question recurs that does not seem to interest any of the

surrounding adults: how long will this situation last? Instead of the agentic protagonists of their lives, children become the audience of a movie in which they suffer the decisions of the system, with no explanation—with no timing.

Often in IA, the structural and organisational faults of the services intertwine with professional faults and motivate the professional delegation to other known and respected figures, as well as the complete unfulfilment of the mandate to inform the minor and ensure they participate. Such failures also raise wider issues about the value and worth of looked-after children and young people, the status of those who look after them and the resourcing of the childcare system (Stein, 2006).

All around the community: collective defence mechanisms hinder the detection

The fact that children in residential care are still easily stereotyped and worthless in the eyes of the residential childcare community affects the resources available for their care (Colton, 2002) and plays an important role in the relationship that is established with the surrounding local community. Narratives often point to the feeling of being stigmatised at school, the memory of being identified as a group—the ‘home kids’, ‘those of...’. Even their clothing marks them as different (Daly, 2014b): they use other children’s clothes, shoes and backpacks to avoid waste (Forde, 1999). The result for them was an increased feeling of isolation and discomfort: ‘We were totally isolated in this boarding school. All around the school yard there were fences beyond which we didn’t set foot’. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 24)

Frequent visits from outsiders, who never realised what was going on in the childcare community, contributed to strengthen the pervasive experience of powerlessness, the perception of not being credible and the belief that they could not tell because no one would understand: ‘I was always hoping that someone would notice something...There were so many people coming... I was always hoping...’. (Sasca Project, 2019b, p. 13)

Attempts of revelation, such as attempts to escape maltreatment by fleeing, are often intercepted by the abuser, and harshly punished or not seriously considered by the recipients (Gallagher, 2000). Children are not credible. The status of the children, the status of the staff and the organisation running the facilities, as well as the invisibility of the institutional life to outsiders, are often real enablers of abuse (Daly, 2014b). Narratives often mention escapes, like those interrupted by the desperate awareness of not knowing where to go or by being caught and brought back, or the repeated ones, in groups, reported in the newspapers but still insufficient to draw the attention and intervention of the civil and professional community.

At school it seemed that teachers did not notice. Yes, even there I was hoping: one year a boy had escaped, they looked for him, it happened several times. But it never crossed their minds that it was not good in there. . . . (Sasca Project, 2019b, p. 13)

Such behaviour and treatment would be unacceptable with individuals who are not so stigmatised. However, during their childhood and later, when as young adults they denounce or testify about what happened to them, these children take on a dual role: as victims and as a threat (Hendrick, 1994): ‘Many times, people tell us “why didn’t you say it before?” Look at the facts today and give yourself an answer: many people still do not believe us, keep defending. . . Imagine before! Too many hook-ups’. (Sasca Project, 2019b, p. 14)

It is worth noting that often when stories of abuse in out-of-home care begin to emerge (i.e. mostly when children become adults), the local community is not surprised—as if they already knew. The powerful collective defence mechanism of repression of the problem is often amplified by the prestigious reputation of the institution where the abuse takes place and on which the minor depends, with no alternative (Wolfe *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, it sometimes occurs that the defence mechanisms of the outside system take on a particularly distortive intensity, enhanced by the weighty economic factors involved. Indeed, it is not infrequent that organisations transfer considerable financial resources at a national or international level (Bianchi *et al.*, 2018). This is what happened at Il Forteto as a powerful productive reality in the agricultural and dairy field. It is thus the victims who are blamed by the territory to which they belong because with their denunciation they have upset the pre-existing balances and caused damage to important economic realities, thus jeopardising workplaces. The same rigidity of the defensive mechanisms is amplified when the abuses are committed within care communities managed by religious entities: ‘You have no idea how hard it was to be believed. We always had to fight against the label of “children with a hard past”’. (Aversa, 2020, p. 10)

In IA, the disclosure of the facts entails further IA in the form of secondary victimisation through behaviours of the minimisation of suffering, blame and devaluation of the victim and the tendency to repress the problem, as well as the deep-rooted assumption that the suffering of the victim is to be connected to a given behaviour of the victim themselves (Lerner, 1980).

During the time of the complaints, attempts to discredit us by belittling our words were evident, playing on our past. I personally told to my guardian about the sexual approach I received, and she suggested I seek treatment ‘from a good one’, without believing me. Afterwards, she told anyone who might know me that I had lost my mind. (Aversa, 2020, p. 10)

Conclusion

So far, we have described the characteristics of IA in residential child-care services that underlie the extreme difficulty of its surfacing. The story of the collapse of the entire protection system around Il Forteto in Italy is certainly extraordinary, but it is neither unique, distant, nor unrepeatable. What happened at Il Forteto is something that can and does happen elsewhere, albeit with different forms and severity.

These stories of the violations of the fundamental human rights of children question each professional and institution on the themes of collective responsibility and social justice and represent the failure of the public protection function. For social work, dealing with it is as necessary as it is challenging. The emotional reactions of indignation are not enough (Bertani *et al.*, 2017). Violent attacks on professions, on the system or on individuals are useless. Ideological opposition for or against the family, for or against host communities, for or against the protection system does not help either (MLPS, 2022b). The ‘Declaration of the Lanzarote Committee on protecting children in out-of-home care from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse’, adopted in October 2019, claims the need to support actions and research on the theme at a national and international level, giving value to the perspective of the former children (Lanzarote Committee, 2019).

The survivors show us the way ahead: the ordinary courage to tell their story and put their heart alongside their thoughts, the effort of overcoming shame, the subsequent possibility to regain the ability to think and the power to change. They show us the only way to succeed is to name and keep in mind this specific type of maltreatment—that is, to look, to recognise, to make room for questions and to care for the doubts. It is a commitment—a choice. The possible and necessary aim consists in implementing the early detection and prevention of IA in out-of-home care and supporting the responsible execution of the duty to protect and promote rights that are central to social work.

This objective should fall along several levels (MLPS, 2017). At the systemic level, it is necessary to strengthen the awareness of the existence of multiple and differentiated responsibilities, in which each actor is called upon to take certain decisions and not others. The complex and articulated system of interactions between multiple institutional actors needs to be clearly defined and monitored. The clarity of institutional mandates, as well as the care for the substantial rigour in procedures and functions, guarantees against many of the drifts described so far about Il Forteto and many other stories of IA.

At the cultural level, mutual control between professionals should be seen as the exercise of a professional responsibility, rather than a denunciation. When consistently supported by the organisation, this makes it possible to be careful about any eventual concerns about colleagues and

to formulate questions and doubts: it allows expression of one's own difficulties and requests for support. Assessment and monitoring must be legitimised and properly acted upon at several levels, in the network, in the organisation and between professionals.

For family and childcare and protection systems to be effective, priority must be given to children's policies, and adequate economic and structural resources must first be ensured. It is essential to preside over organisational arrangements (Kaufman, 2019) that support and supervise professional competence by ensuring specific training on IA and supervision, that are open to discussion and that care for the expression, collection and processing of doubts.

Finally, the individual professional level is no less important. The survivors emphasise that the single individual can also make a difference. The behaviours, the reflections, the awareness of the need for rigorous competent training and constant learning, the ability to report excessive workloads or organisational issues—they all can be a first step towards change. The constant presence of professionals in an authentic personal relationship with the children can be an important pillar in the children's lives to which they can refer in moments of need, even though they might not show appreciation for it in the present. The availability of professionals to question their choices, as well as their explicit willingness to help every child to report violations of their needs in the protection process, can make a difference. The challenging ability to recognise and to deal with one's own errors and professional inadequacies—to make them generative—is crucial (Bertotti, 2020) and can make a personal tenacious and persistent contribution towards preventing the repetition of stories like this one.

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