

U N A R S

Understanding Agency & Resistance Strategies:
Children in situations of domestic violence & abuse

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – FINAL REPORT

UNDERSTANDING AGENCY AND RESISTANCE STRATEGIES

(UNARS):

Children's Experiences of Domestic Violence

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Alexander

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Author's Note:

This report summarises a very large set of complex qualitative data. To provide an overview of the project, this is necessarily a descriptive report. Many sections of the report are more fully elaborated in journal articles and book chapters that are either in press or in production. Please contact Jane.Callaghan@northampton.ac.uk if you would like copies of these papers, or if you would like to be on the mailing list to receive notifications about future published work.

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Executive summary

Background to the UNARS project

- This report focuses on children's experiences of domestic violence, in families affected by domestic violence. Our report is concerned with children's experiences in situations where the main perpetrator and victim of violence would be legally defined as two adults in an intimate relationship (not where the child is involved in 'dating violence').
- Research and professional practice that focuses on children as damaged witnesses to domestic violence tends to describe children as passive and helpless. Our study, based on interviews with more than a hundred children across four European countries, recognises the significant suffering caused to children who experience domestic violence. However, it also tells a parallel story, about the capacity of children who experience domestic violence to cope, to maintain a sense of agency, to be resilient, and to find ways of resisting violence, and build a positive sense of who they are.
- Our project highlights the implications of policy and professional discourses that position children as 'damaged' and as 'witnesses', but that do not recognise children's capacity to experience domestic violence, make sense of it, and respond to it in ways that are agentic, resilient and resistant. Describing children as 'witnesses', 'exposed to domestic violence' and 'damaged by it' erodes children's capacity to represent their experiences, and to articulate the ways that they cope with and resist such experiences. By focusing on children's capacity for conscious meaning making and agency in relation to their experiences of domestic violence, we highlight the importance of recognising its impact on children, and their right to representation as victims in the context of domestic violence.
- The project addresses several major questions:
 1. How do children experience domestic violence and what evidence is there in their accounts of capacity for agency, resistance and resilience?
 2. How might we devise an intervention focused on agency, resistance and resilience for children who experience domestic violence, rather than the usual interventions focused on behaviour change and perceptions of damage? How do children experience such an intervention?
 3. How do those who work with children affected by domestic violence see them, and what implications do these representations have for children's ability to cope with and recover from domestic violence? What does the policy and service landscape look like for these children?

4. How do practitioners who work with domestic violence experience training that enables them to consider children’s agency, resistance and resilience

Method

- The UNARS project adopted an action research approach, organised in two phases.
- The first phase of the project involved establishing an understanding of children’s experiences of domestic violence, and the resources available to them to support them in that experience. This was achieved through the use of individual interviews, photo elicitation, and creative methods, with children.
- In addition, we developed an understanding of the service landscape and policy context for children in each partner country, to understand both how children who experienced domestic violence were seen in each country, and what interventions and support were available to them.
- Our learning in this phase of the project informed the second phase, in which a group based therapeutic intervention was devised, implemented and evaluated.
- In addition, a training intervention for professionals and volunteers working with children who experience domestic violence was developed and implemented.
- Four countries participated in the UNARS projects – Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom and Spain. All partner countries participated in all phases of the project.
- UNARS is the largest qualitative study to explore children’s experiences of domestic violence. It involved:
 - interviews and photo elicitation work with 110 young people
 - focus groups with 74 professionals and 39 parents/ carers
 - a policy analysis across four European countries
 - an intervention with 60 children and young people who had experienced domestic violence, and follow up interviews about the experience of the intervention with 21 children
 - a training intervention with 233 professionals

The “Voices” of the Children: Experiences of agency, resistance and paradoxical resilience

Using creative methods, like photo elicitation, drawing, family maps and spatial mapping, as well as individual interviewing, the research team was able to support children in articulating experiences that might be difficult to articulate, by providing them with a range of possible forms of expression. From the Individual interviews and photo elicitation activities, several key themes emerged. These included

- **Managing Disclosure** — disclosing experiences of violence, or concerns about family life was seen as risky, and children learned to manage what they did and did not say, how they said it, and to whom, as a way of keeping themselves and their families safe.
- **Redefining and managing Relationships**— children made complex and situated decisions about who they kept close, and who they kept distant; they re-defined their notion of family to enable them to include and exclude those who were or were not supportive for them; and they had complex strategies for forming and maintaining friendships.
- A general pattern in our interviews suggested that caring gives children a considerable sense of validation, empowerment and competence. Understood from the point of view of the professional, this kind of caregiving is problematic, representing children taking on premature adult roles. However, this kind of interpretation is firmly located in normative understandings of childhood; it is an adultist interpretation, which does not take into sufficient account how children understand the experience of caring themselves.
- Children who experience domestic violence are often described in domestic violence literature as having poor social skills (Wood & Sommers, 2011). Detailed interviews with children suggest that this is only a partial story of children’s experiences, and that children’s relational experiences and relational coping is subtle and complex when living with domestic violence and its aftermath.
- **Use of Space and Material Objects**— children made use of the space around them, and of their embodied experiences to create safe spaces for themselves and their siblings, and to enable them to feel a sense of escape.
- The experience of being embodied subjects, moving in physical spaces emerged as an important feature of both children’s experiences of domestic violence, and of their resistance to it. Even when children were not directly physically hurt themselves, their bodies were still experienced as both a target of control and as a site of resistance to that control. Children were acutely aware of the spaces of the home, and the ways those spaces were used by the family at different times of the day. They were aware, for instance, that shared spaces – living rooms / lounges, dining rooms, kitchens – were more dangerous spaces, and that these spaces were often highly regulated and controlled by the perpetrator. Children used a range of strategies to create alternative safe spaces for themselves.
- **Creative and embodied coping** – children used a range of creative and expressive strategies, including drawing, music, sport, and play – in ways that were cathartic, and in ways that helped them feel safer or more in control of themselves and their environment.
- Photo elicitation and other creative techniques offered children an additional strategy to communicate their experiences, and this enabled an articulation of their non-verbal forms of coping

and resisting in situations of domestic violence. Children are able to communicate clearly how their use of space, of relationships and of creativity and sport enabled them to cope more effectively with the experience of violence and its aftermath.

- **Experiences of Services** - Children's experiences of services were varied, but generally not particularly positive. Most reported a sense of not being heard, not being listened to, by those who were supposed to be there to help them.
- **Normative childhood and paradoxical resilience** - In understanding how children are able to resist and have agency in situations of domestic violence and abuse, we suggest that what characterises children's experiences of violence is a kind of paradoxical resilience. When children live in conflict laden environments, they have to find complex ways of coping and managing themselves and their relationships. What may appear as 'dysfunctional' and difficult in the eyes of clinically trained adults, is often the way that children have found to cope in highly located, creative and agentic ways. These strategies need to be understood in context, and from the perspective of the child, to see their function in children's lives.

In our account of children's agency in their experiences of domestic violence, we have highlighted the often complex, contradictory nature of the way that children cope. We do not wish to understate or underestimate how much pain domestic violence causes to children: its negative impact is very significant. However, our argument is that in focusing just on damage and on a very limited and often acontextual understanding of resilience that tends to position resilience as an outcome or a set of character traits or skills, the domestic violence literature effectively functions to limit our reading of children's lives just to damage. It underestimates the points of strength that children are able to build, it underestimates their creativity, their capacity to find ways to cope with even the most difficult situations. It underestimates their capacity for resistance and for agency.

Building an Intervention to Support Children's Capacity for Agency, Resistance and Resilience

- The intervention focused on providing support for children by building on their existing strengths, and by developing (rather than trying to remove) the resilient, resistant and agentic strategies and sense of self that children have already built. In this sense it is very different from behaviourally focused intervention programmes for children who experience domestic violence, that tend to view children's responses to domestic violence as a set of behavioural problems to be removed. Rather this approach focuses on understanding the function of children's responses to violence, and the way that they make meaning of those responses.

- The group therapy intervention was built using insights from the interviews completed with children and young people. Our intention for the intervention was to build on the strengths and strategies that children told us had helped them to cope, be resilient and find ways to resist. We resisted the tendency in work with children affected by domestic violence to attempt to restore 'normative childhood', instead respecting children's capacity for agency, and the paradoxical nature of their coping and resistance. We were interested in supporting children from the point of view of their own coping, rather than trying to dismantle their strategies to build ones that were consistent with idea of what 'good' or 'normal' childhood is.
- Building on our research findings in the first phase of the project, the main objective of our intervention is to empower children by helping them: build safety and trust; develop trust in themselves and others; explore, share and develop coping strategies; build positive self-identity and envisage a positive potential future; challenge myths and self-fulfilling prophecies about domestic violence; foster caring relationships and social support; and deal with endings and loss.
- To this purpose we integrated creative, narrative, systemic and Gestalt therapeutic techniques. We developed a range of group activities children could choose from, that involved materials like photos, collages, puppets and other creative media (e.g. music, drawing, poetry..), together with embodied and somatic exploration. The creative and embodied techniques helped to engage children and adults in a shared process, by blending verbal with non-verbal communication.
- The intervention was piloted in the UK, and then rolled out through the four countries of the partnership for a total of 10 groups and 60 young people.
- Across all four partner locations, children and young people were extremely positive about the intervention. The most common comments in the interviews were that they wanted the intervention to be longer, and that it offered a positive context in which they felt able to articulate their experiences – sometimes for the first time.
- Children reported that they experienced the group as a trusting environment in which they could express themselves, build self-confidence, and test out and strengthen their capacity to trust others.
- Through the intervention, children had shifted their perspective on the inevitability of intergenerational transmission, and had been able to forge a more positive vision of their future selves.
- Understanding that other children had experienced similar difficulties promoted a sense of social connectedness to others and reduced participants' feelings of isolation and 'differentness'.
- Children's scores on the wellbeing measures at the beginning and end of the intervention did show an improvement in subjective wellbeing in all 4 areas ('Me', 'Family', 'School', 'Everything'), as

children moved through this programme, and the difference between pre and post measures was statistically significant.

Policy and Practice in work with children who experience domestic violence

- Our project highlights the implications of policy frameworks that do not include children as victims who experience domestic violence, but that instead represent them as passive witnesses. Such frameworks erode children's representation and voice in professional and policy discourses.
- The policy documents on domestic violence in all four participating countries generally omit children altogether, entrenching a view that children are not victims of domestic violence, but rather are 'collateral damage' or 'witnesses' to it. We argue that this produces a service landscape in which the needs of children are portrayed as additional in domestic violence support, and that consequently children's needs are often overlooked.
- We argue that policy frameworks must shift to recognise children's experiences of domestic violence, and to recognise children as victims of domestic violence, not as witnesses or as additional to adult experiences.

Focus groups with professionals

- Focus groups were carried out with groups of professionals in each country. Our aim was to provide an understanding of the practice landscape children must navigate to secure support when they experience domestic violence
- In focus groups, professionals expressed concerns about the lack of continuity between services and an insufficient range of supportive and specialist services needed to support victims of domestic abuse. In each partner country, particular concerns were raised about service gaps, and professionals suggested that a better equipped system would be more functional and effective. Gaps in the system include the lack of availability of specialist local organisations (in Greece and Spain), different sheltering solutions for victims, and shelters that could include children over 18, larger families, and teenage boys.
- Professionals often describe the child as 'unprotected' and the parent as 'failing to protect'. In this sense the child victim comes to embody and reflect the parents' failure to meet the principal requirements of parenthood such as providing a safe environment.
- Professional stakeholders are placed in positions of control (and educators/schools are given prime responsibility for identifying CYP, raising awareness of DVA and channelling appropriate support to CYP). However, the role of professional stakeholders is perceived to be hampered by cutbacks and

restricted financial resources. Positive policy directives designed to support CYP were reported, by professionals in focus groups, to be delivered in a way which resembled a mechanical tick box exercise where children themselves are made invisible and outcome measures are prioritised.

Focus groups with parents / carers

- In focus groups with carers, the child-victim was described as affected by violence in dramatic ways. The child-victim is described in relation to the consequences the DVA has on his/her personality and mental health. The consequences appear to be serious and are demonstrated mainly in the child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors. This was a remarkably consistent construction of the child who has experienced domestic violence, across all the parent focus groups.

Training Professionals Who Work with Domestic Violence

- A range of professionals were trained, including social services staff, psychologists, teachers, police officers, GPs, nurses, domestic violence support workers and family support workers. Training was well received, and there was a strong perception of a need for more training in all regions. Quantitative and qualitative course evaluation questionnaire data supports the conclusion that the training was very successful.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The key argument of the UNARS project is that it is important to explore how children give voice to their own experiences, if we are to avoid the risk of oversimplifying their responses, and of reducing their experience to pathology and damage. By facilitating children's articulation of their experiences, we are able to see how the damaging impact of domestic violence intertwines with complex coping and resistance strategies, which children are able to use to build their own sense of resilience.
- The project highlights how children understand, make sense of and experience domestic violence, as conscious, meaning making beings whose capacity to resist, have agency and be resilient is intricately linked to the context in which such resistance is made necessary.
- The analysis of interviews with children who experience domestic violence suggests that the 'victim' in domestic violence is not just the adult in the intimate dyad; victims are also any children within the household who are affected by the violence, either directly or indirectly. We have argued that it is important that children's capacity to make meaning of their experiences of domestic violence, to be harmed by it, and to have a sense of agency and resistance to it underscores the importance of a shift in legal definitions and policy around domestic violence.

- Facilitating children’s articulation of their experience and of their lived experiences enabled us to develop a creative and relationally oriented group based intervention that built on children’s existing strengths to further develop their capacity for resistance and resilience. Children experienced this intervention as a positive context in which they could talk about their experiences, and work them through, in a manner that enabled them to feel that they were growing in strength and capacity.
- Professionals also reported that training to explore the meaning of domestic violence for children, and to consider children’s contextual capacity for resilience and resistance, was useful and would help them to work more responsively with children in the future.

Based on the findings of the project, the following recommendations are made:

- **Legal Status and Protection:** The Istanbul Convention refers to ‘all victims’ of domestic violence, however children are not explicitly defined as victims either in the Istanbul convention, or the national and regional legal and policy frameworks that implement it. In this sense, children are absent from legal definitions (except as victims of dating violence). Children who ‘witness’ domestic violence do not have a legal status as ‘victim’. (This is changing in Spain, where the distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ victims is being removed from Spanish statutes). Children are therefore constructed in law and policy as an absence, as ‘collateral damage’ to adult domestic violence, and this has consequences for how they are understood and treated in criminal justice, social services and voluntary sector organisations. The UNARS project has highlighted that children experience domestic violence, and cope with domestic violence, in much the same way that adult victims do, and that the distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ victim, or between ‘adult victim’ and ‘child witness’ is not sustainable. When policy frameworks do not include children as victims, this contributes to the erosion of children’s representation and voice in professional and policy discourses. By focusing on children’s capacity for conscious meaning making and agency in relation to their experiences of domestic violence, we highlight the importance of recognising the impact domestic violence has on children, and their right to representation as victims in the context of domestic violence.
- **Representation and Voice:** The UNARS project has demonstrated the importance and value of listening to children’s voice. This facilitates children’s recognition of their own strengths, and should be a key element of therapeutic work with children and young people who experience domestic violence. In addition, fostering a context in which children feel empowered to speak about their experiences creates space for professionals to better understand children’s experiences, and to respond more appropriately to their needs. It also creates opportunities for the co-production of more relevant policy and service provisions. In policy and legislative frameworks, we need to extend

and strengthen the requirement to listen to the child's voice. Children who experience domestic violence are often framed by professionals as 'vulnerable' and unable to cope with talking about their experiences. This kind of gatekeeping effectively blocks children from access to representation, and prevents them from articulating their experiences of domestic violence, perpetuating the view of them as 'silent witnesses', and occluding their experiences as victims, and their capacity to cope.

- **Language:** There needs to be a concerted attempt to change the language in national and regional policy to one which more actively advocates the recognition of CYP experiences and strengths such that interventions more closely align with their needs and place them in more privileged positions as experts on their own situations. In addition, the development of a common language across professionals (create a glossary of terms) should be encouraged so that jargon does not get in the way of helping children and young people.
- **Training:** Many professionals reflected that they lacked the skills to support them in talking to children about their experiences of domestic violence. To create a service and criminal justice culture in which children are able to voice their experiences and seek the help and support they need, professionals need to be skilled in responding to children. This requires further training to empower those who work with children and families who experience domestic violence to hear what children have to say. In addition, there is a clear need to support criminal justice and policing professionals to provide more effective responses to children who experience domestic violence.
- **Services:** In all partner countries, there were concerns about the availability of services for children who experience domestic violence. Parents, professionals and children all noted that there are very few (or no) services available for children that enable children to talk about their experiences. Where services are available, they are often difficult to access, and not provided 'on time' for children, in a manner that is responsive to children's needs. Most support for children affected by domestic violence are offered within domestic violence shelters and services, which typically only work with families at the point of fleeing. Many of the children and parents we talked to noted that they only started to process their experiences some time after the violence had ended, once they were in an environment that seemed 'safe'. Services for children are often centred on those in need of 'protection' (i.e. those in immediate risk). But this is not the ideal space in which supportive and particularly therapeutic services should be provided. Services need to be more accessible (e.g. in community contexts, in school, in youth centres) and to be offered in a more flexible way, to enable children to use them when *they need to*, not when the service feels that they should. Working 'with' not 'for' children and young people: Regional statutory organisations should develop their policies to emphasize "working with" and not "working for" CYP. In this way, DVA can be conceptualised within policy as a shared and preventable social issue between the child and professionals. In this way, CYP

are likelier to develop a sense of control and build on existing personal, relational family and community resilience.

- **Collaborative and partnership working:** It is important to recognise the impact of austerity and recession on the European service landscape. Collaborative working has been undermined by service cuts, and by competitive commissioning arrangements. There is an urgent need to strengthen partnership and multi agency working in the domestic violence field, to enable families to receive an appropriate range of support in fleeing and in recovery from domestic violence. In addition, there is a need to address directly the impact of budgetary constraints on the potential support available for children and families who experience domestic violence: there remains an urgent need for an influx of **finance and resource**. We suggest that the need to develop and ring fence dedicated social funding to ensure the sustainability and adequate funding for the provision of child-oriented services in community settings.
- **Awareness raising campaigns:** Dedicated efforts are required to raise awareness of the needs and impacts on quality of life for children living in situations of domestic violence. While effective campaigns have been constructed in the past and continue to run successfully, there is a need to target campaigns in places such as community venues, such as sports venues and shopping centres. Campaigning in places which parents and children access freely could broaden to audiences of such campaigns. Such campaigns have typically dwelt on the negative aspects of damage and victimization where children are featured. More positive images of empowered children and young people are called for, alongside more nuanced aspects of the impact of gender and culture. Aside from the specific focus on DV and children and young people within DV, campaigns should aim to improve the image of women in society and the citizenship rights of children.