

Children's Experience with Protection Procedures in Slovenia

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Child protection procedures in cases of violence, abuse and neglect are complex and could be very stressful for both the children and adults involved. Professionals are obliged to intervene into family life and provide protection when the child's wellbeing is jeopardized, but they often face the challenge of how to maintain the balance between child protection procedures, that need to be timely and efficient, and providing the child a time and space to express their opinions, feelings and to influence matters that affect their lives. A review of previous studies on the participation of children in child protection processes showed that in most cases, children are more or less passive observers with little or no influence on protection procedures and consequently on their life courses. This article provides answers to the questions of how children assess protection procedures, what their experiences are, and how they perceived interventions by various institutions. We also included views of professionals on the role of children in protection procedures. The analysis showed the importance of the quality of the relationship between the child and the professional, of collaborative conversation, and understanding the trauma and support that can alleviate anxiety experienced when the violence is reported later through the protection process. Another issue that deserves special attention is the need to provide space for children to exert greater influences on decisions affecting their lives (e.g., reporting of violence, court proceedings, police procedures etc.) and the meaning of cross-sectoral cooperation between all institutions involved in child protection.

Keywords: child protection, children participation, life courses, domestic violence

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1 Introduction

Violence against children,⁴ meaning all forms of violence regardless of where it takes place and who the perpetrators are, has been an important social topic in Slovenia for quite some time. The interest in the topic especially increased after the adoption of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (Zakon o preprečevanju nasilja v družini [ZPND], 2008), attracting attention from experts, researchers, politicians, the media and the general public (Aničič, Hrovat Svetičič, Hrovat, & Plaz, 2017; Antončič, 2017: 223; ZPND, 2008). While violence is a serious social problem in general, domestic violence involving children in particular deserves special attention, since most children experience violence within the family environment.

An important starting point in working with children exposed to various forms of violence is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Konvencija o otrokovih pravicah, 1992 [e.g., Articles 3., 12., 16., 19., 20]); Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2014; Head, 1998; Munro, 2011; Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012). The signatories to this convention are obliged to respect and implement the child's right to protection (against various forms of exploitation and violence, abuse and maltreatment), the right to adequate care (receiving and accessing various things and services, e.g., citizenship, medical care, education, rest, play), and the right to participate (the option of participating in decisions that relate to their own lives). Similarly, the Victims' Directive (2012) emphasizes that all EU members should consider the best child's interest when a victim is a child. The child's best interest is judged in each case separately. But the most important is that the approach is child-friendly and considers the child's age, maturity and his/her views, needs and concerns.

On the one hand, children are recognized as vulnerable persons who need to be protected by adults especially from abuse, violence and neglectful treatment, and on the other, as competent persons with their own interests who are able to take decisions, have the right to express their views, to be heard, and to actively participate in the shaping of their own

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⁴ In this text, we begin with the definition in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Konvencija o otrokovih pravicah, 1992) and Victims' Directive (2012) defining as the child any person under 18.

lives and future (see Boyden, 1997; Percy-Smith, & Thomas, 2010; Woodhead, 2010). Protection of children from violence, abuse and neglectful treatment is imperative, since children should not be burdened with the responsibility of making long-term decisions (Head, 1998: 195), especially regarding complex issues such as domestic violence. Therefore, two things are important in child protection: it is the responsibility of adults to protect children, but at the same time, we must respect their ability to participate and express opinions. Loreman (2009: 118–119) stressed both points in the model respecting childhood. It is our responsibility as adults to safeguard children, but we also need to be able to recognize when they need to be given space to explore and shape their own world, while we continue to stand by them and support them as they advance along the path of growth and education. Protection of children takes place in contexts where various rights and duties converge – parents' rights, children's rights and the duty of the State to intervene in family life when the child's wellbeing is jeopardized (Cossar et al., 2014). Cossar, et al. (2014: 103) emphasize that precisely such a context presents a challenge for professionals who endeavour to strike the balance between protection of children and the need to create space for children to influence their own life courses. The child protection process is managed by adults, so it is their duty to provide space for a child to be heard and for the child's opinion to be taken into account. Undoubtedly, in their wish to protect children, adults often create situations in which children have minimal influence on the issues that importantly affect their lives, or have no influence at all. This alienates children and makes them mere observers of their own life courses (see Hart, 1992; James, 2007; Lansdown, 2010; Loreman, 2009; Rutar, 2013).

The goal of this article is to stress the role of the child in the child protection process from the moment violence is disclosed to court proceedings. Throughout all phases of the process, children are left at the margins without an option to influence the course of events. We will be interested in how children assess protection procedures, what their experiences are, and how they perceive interventions by various institutions. In so doing, we seek to understand how to turn children's wishes into institutional practices. To this goal, we will present the findings of the research that was part of the project entitled: *Interdisciplinary Lifelong Learning Programme in Child Protection*.⁵ We will first give a brief overview of the

⁵ The project took place from July 2017 to December 2017 at the Faculty of Social Work of the University of Ljubljana. It was financed by the UNICEF Refugee and Migrant response Slovenia which prior to it conducted the analysis of child protection in Slovenia. They established gaps in systemic solutions and provision of services in the area of child protection. The main goal of the project was to develop the training programme that would

key findings of other studies on how to support children in child protection processes in the way that would enable them to actively participate and influence decisions significantly affecting their life courses. We will then proceed to present the child protection system in Slovenia and the findings of a study on the experiences and needs of children during the child protection process. Put differently, we present the child protection process in Slovenia through the experiences of children involved in protection procedures and professional from different sectors (social security, education, police, health etc.) and fields (policy makers, researchers, practitioners).

2 Participation of Children in Child Protection Programmes: A Review of Existing Studies

Child protection procedures are complex and can be stressful for both children and adults. In the final report of the extensive review of child protection in England, Munro (2011: 23–24) wrote that if the child protection system is to be efficient, it should in the first place be child-centred. This means that children should be viewed as individuals with rights, including the right to participate in accordance with their age and maturity⁶, in decisions that importantly affect their life courses. Children are the key source of information about their lives but, as Munro concluded, they are either excluded or minimally involved in protection procedures. Professionals involved in protection procedures do not talk with children sufficiently, so they tend to overlook their feelings and needs,

be based on the interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral approach to child protection, including the areas of social security, education, healthcare, the police and the judiciary which are obliged to participate. The study of the situation in the child protection area was conducted within the framework of this project.

⁶ The wording of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) "in accordance with the child's maturity and age" opens a number of questions, such as what it means to say that the child is mature, when one can say that the child is mature or old enough to influence the decisions and be taken into account when taking decisions, and so on. Adults have the obligation to respect and implement the principles enshrined in the Convention, but the difficulties occur when in so doing they hit upon their own views and interpretations of what, for instance, an adequate age and maturity of children is (see Lansdown, 2001, 2010; Kroflič, 2010; Rutar, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). In many cases, the interpretation of what a child is capable of and when this occurs is tied to the perceptions and beliefs of adults. In practice this means that the child is formally given the opportunity to express its views but if an adult estimates that the child is not old enough to be taken into account, it is the adult that takes the final decision. Therefore, it is necessary for us as adults to reconsider our views and beliefs about children, and primarily to search for the ways of including them in the decision-taking processes that affect them.

or they concentrate excessively on the needs of adults, particularly parents (Munro, 2011).

Winter (2010) starts from the assumption that adults too often view children as passive receivers of services rather than active co-creators of their world, and as a consequence, their wishes and needs are often overlooked. A thoughtful use of various methods and techniques when communicating with children, especially the willingness on the part of adults to listen to children in various ways, are key to enabling the child to participate in a conversation. Only in this way can adults obtain realistic insight and better understand how children see and perceive their worlds. Many approaches to communication with children were developed within the various professions. In social work, we rely on the concept of the working relationship of co-creation, which enables social workers to invite children to co-explore and co-create the changes they wish for. In this way, social workers provide a safe space for the child to participate in a conversation and have the opportunity to be heard (Čačinovič Vogrinčič, 2016).

The opportunity to influence decisions that importantly affect their lives closely depends on children's options for participation. The concept of their participation has gained momentum recently and has become a desired approach in many areas of work (social protection, education, judicial proceedings and the like). Various authors (e.g., Hart, 1992; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003; Lansdown, 2010; Shier, 2001) define the concept and extent of children's participation, but the common denominator of all diverse approaches is Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Konvencija o otrokovih pravicah, 1992). Children's participation greatly varies in practice. In some cases, children have the option of expressing their views about the processes affecting them, but their opinions are not necessarily taken into account. Elsewhere, children share with adults the power and responsibilities for decisions affecting their lives, and their opinions are taken into account. The greater the degree of participation, the more options the child has to exert influence.

Lansdown (2001) explains that when talking about child's influence, one must keep in mind that the right to be heard is not sufficient – what is equally important is that the listener takes seriously what the child says. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992) stipulates that views of the child should be given due weight and that children should be informed about decisions affecting them. Lansdown (2001) also emphasizes that it does not mean that we are obliged to agree with everything that children say, but that we need to respect and take into account their views. Several authors (Gallagher, Smith, Hardy, & Wilkinson, 2012; Thomas, 2005; Vis, Strandbu, Holtan, & Tomas, 2012) pointed

out that in addition to all of the above-mentioned things, children should be explained the consequences of decisions we take, particularly those that contradict their wishes (which is a quite common situation in the child protection processes). Such an approach creates a safe space for children to begin to talk about the issue.

When we talk about children's participation in the protection process and their options of influencing important decisions, it is impossible to ignore the relationship between children (and their families) and professionals. Munro (2011) stresses that the child/professional relationship has direct influence on the effectiveness of help. The findings of some studies indicate that a good relationship between professionals and users of services can mitigate the unpleasant and demanding aspects of the protection procedure, as well as prevent potential negative consequences of the procedure (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2001 in Pölkki et al., 2012; Munro, 2011). Similarly, many studies have shown that children do want to participate in issues affecting their lives, and that it is important for them to be heard, their opinions taken into account, and have the option to have an influence on important decisions relating to their lives (Munro, 2011; Pölkki et al., 2012).

The findings of the study about the participation of children in foster care, conducted by Pölkki and her colleagues in 2010 (2012: 122), showed that children's participation and the option of influencing relevant developments had beneficial effects on their recovery. Children found it important that social workers showed an interest in them, that they listened to them and took their opinions seriously. Those findings could be utilized by all involved institutions to improve the protection process.

Slovenian studies and publications concerned with children's participation in the protection process are scarce, which represents one of the obstacles in regulating this area. Existing laws in Slovenia such as the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (ZPND, 2008), Criminal Code (Kazenski zakonik [KZ], 2012), Family Code (Družinski zakonik [DZ], 2017) do not stipulate direct participation of children in those procedures, since children up to 18 years of age are represented by parents. However, parents are not always capable of best representing their children's interests, especially if they are in conflict (Cossar et al., 2014; Martinjak, 2013; McGhee, 2015: 23; Varuh človekovih pravic, 2013). Letno poročilo Varuha človekovih pravic Republike Slovenije (Varuh človekovih pravic Republike Slovenije, 2018). In response to such situations, in 2005 a project was launched under the auspices of the Human Rights Ombudsman entitled "Advocate – a child's voice." It involved specifically trained people from various walks of life who are certified to represent children in judicial

and other processes (Varuh človekovih pravic, 2013). The role of the representative is to convey to the institutions the child's wishes and opinions, thereby giving a voice to the child and enables the child to exert influence, even if only indirectly. The positive feature of this programme is that the child has the opportunity to shape and then express its wishes in a safe and trustful relationship. However, the institutions involved in the process still have the option to adhere to usual practices and not take into account the child's wishes.

Indeed, the evaluation of the project (Narat, Kovač, Orehek, & Kobal Tomc, 2017: 24) showed that it is very likely that institutions, primarily courts, will not take into account the child's voice. The second obstacle is that institutions do not use the institute of advocate (Narat et al., 2017: 24), meaning that in most procedures children do not have the option of expressing their wishes and opinions.

3 Child Protection Procedures in Slovenia

The most important and the most urgent task in the process of supporting and helping a child who is a victim of violence is to stop violence. Many authors (Aničić et al., 2017; Mikuš Kos, 1997; Veselič, Horvat, & Plaz, 2014) draw attention to the fact that prevention of violence is the responsibility of not only the State and professional institutions (e.g., centres for social work (hereinafter CSW), schools, the police, courts and so on), but of anyone (neighbours, volunteers and the like) who happens to witness inappropriate or inadequate handling or harassment of children. Although we unequivocally agree with that stance, in this article we will restrict ourselves to the operation of professional institutions which are authorized to implement child protection procedures and whose role is especially important precisely because of their authorizations.

We have already mentioned that violence against children is an increasingly burning social topic which importantly influenced the adoption of laws that regulate this segment. Antončič (2017) writes that Slovenia dedicated considerable attention to domestic violence and violence against children, and adopted numerous legislative and social protection measures to protect children from violence, neglect and abuse. Children are thus legally protected against violence, neglect and sexual abuse under the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (ZPND, 2008), the Criminal Code (KZ, 2012) and the Family Code (DZ, 2017). An important step was the amendment to the Domestic Violence Prevention Act adopted in 2016, which explicitly prohibits every form of physical violence against children. The cooperation of various bodies, CSW and inter-institutional cooperation in cases of violence

against children is specified in detail and regulated by the Rules on the organisation and work of multidisciplinary teams and regional services and on the activities of CSW in dealing with domestic violence (Pravilnik o sodelovanju organov ter o delovanju centrov za socialno delo, multidisciplinarnih timov in regijskih služb pri obravnavi nasilja v družini, 2009, 2017). Special rule books were also adopted for the areas of education, healthcare and the police.

The process of child protection usually involves various services and organizations, so in practice, if the child is to be truly supported, the cooperation of all actors involved is of utmost importance. Aničić et al. (2017: 83) point out that stopping violence is a responsibility of not only one professional worker, but the whole team. The help and support of professional institutions begins when an instance of violence is reported. Whenever there is a suspicion of a criminal offence where the victim of violence is a child, the incident must be immediately reported to the police or the State Prosecutor's Office. Article 6 of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act (ZPND, 2008) clearly stipulates that everyone, and especially professionals in healthcare, educational institutions and social institutions and heads of children's programmes in sports and cultural associations, should immediately and regardless of the provisions regulating the safeguarding of professional secrecy, notify the CSW, the police or the State Prosecutor's Office if there is a suspicion that the victim of violence is a child or a person who because of personal circumstances is not capable of self-care. As soon as it is notified, the CSW implements all measures to protect the victim in accordance with the guidelines for work with victims of violence. If the CSW estimates that cooperation of other institutions or bodies is necessary, it forms a multi-disciplinary team.

The protection plan includes the evaluation of threats to the child and specifications of adequate measures for work with the family and child, whereby ensuring a child's safety is the primary task. The protection plan should determine how to ensure long-term protection for the child and provide assistance to the family to help them change their practices.

4 Research Methods

In this article, we present the findings of a qualitative research study conducted within the framework of the above-mentioned project aimed at shaping the inter-institutional and multi-disciplinary education programme on the protection of children. Two basic goals were formulated:

1. To analyse and present the children's views about protection procedures, their experiences, and perception of interventions made by various institutions.

2. To analyse and present the views of professionals on the role of children in the protection procedures and its connection with the topics highlighted by the children in the interviews.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with children that have experienced a child protection procedure, and focus groups with professionals that are involved on different levels in child protection (policy-makers and persons from the ministries, researchers and academics, and practitioners).

4.1 Population and Sampling

We conducted five semi-structured interviews; two with young adults who experienced protection as children, and three with children who have experienced protection (4 females and 1 male). The interviewees were 15 to 21 years of age, who at the time when they experienced protection, were between 13 and 17 years of age. Two participants received protection twice, one of them at age 7 and then at 10, and the other at age 13 and 16. The main reason of protection was domestic violence. Four children needed protection because of violence caused by one or both parents or guardians, and one was a victim of his violent boyfriend. The interviewed children came from various regions of Slovenia⁷ (three were from the Podravska region, one from the Savinjska region, and one from the Obalno-kraška region). We used purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful because we targeted children with experiences in child protection procedures, and convenient because we got contacts with children from various social services professionals. Only children who were willing to participate were contacted for the interview, which is the main reason for the low number of participants. We also conducted four focus groups. We invited different experts from all sectors (e.g., education, health, social affairs, the judiciary, and police) which we identified as relevant in the field of child protection, and organised four focus groups: a) policy-makers in the field of child protection; b) researchers who also deal with the issue of child protection; and c) two groups of practitioners who are directly involved in child protection. The overall number of participants was 10 policy-makers, 14 researchers, and 13 practitioners, all together 37 participants.

4.2 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted from August to September, 2017 by the two researchers from the Faculty of Social Work. Before the interviews, researchers obtained written consent to

participate from youngsters, parents, or legal guardians. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. We took into account the fact that speaking about their past experiences of violence and neglect was stressful for interviewees and might provoke traumatic experiences. We endeavoured to create a safe space for a conversation during which we explained in detail how the interviews would proceed and outlined the goal of the interview and data collection. We also made it clear that they could refuse to be interviewed. This was an important part of preparations. The children were also informed that we were not going to study their experience of violence, but would focus instead on the protection they received. The children who decided to take part in the study gave exhaustive answers, and were also able to explain the elements of protection which they wished were handled differently.

The focus groups were conducted in September and October 2017 at the Faculty of Social Work, and each focus group was led by one experienced researcher.

4.3 Data Processing and Analysis

We used qualitative coding (Creswell, 2007; Mesec, 1998) for textual analysis and data processing, organised it into meaningful units, ascribed an adequate notion based on its content, then grouped the data by common codes and then into supra-categories. We obtained comprehensive material, and using definitions we compiled the vocabulary of the emerging test theory. To ensure protection of personal data and prevent identification of personal stories, names and personal data have been changed.

5 The Findings of the Study

The analysis of interviews and focus groups showed that various institutions are usually involved in protection procedures. The results from the interviews showed that a CSW, a crisis centre, the police, and the court were included in all cases where the child needed protection from domestic violence. In addition, the children also mentioned other institutions or persons with whom they established contacts; for example, the residential home for youngsters, the mental health centre for children and youth, the elementary or secondary school, a physician, other family members who provided informal help, and the like. Participants in all four focus groups stressed the importance of cooperation between individual institutions that are involved in supporting and helping the child in the protection procedures. In their assessment, in practice, it is all too common that each institution covers only its own field of work, and the consequence of such poor cooperation or even non-cooperation of individual institution is that the protec-

⁷ The grouping is based on the statistical regions.

tion procedures do not proceed in the way they should, and the children do not get the help they really need. An additional problem is that within the working time there is not enough time (or even none) dedicated to multidisciplinary teams.

5.1 Children's Experiences of the Protection Process

The participants of the focus groups, especially the practitioners, estimated that there is an increasing number of children who are deeply disappointed in the system. Children often have a feeling that the system did not protect them, and they did not get the experience of being heard. Participants of focus groups relate this with the fact that despite the encouragement of children to talk about violence and abuse, there are no quick solutions for those children who actually do ask for help. They stressed that children expect solutions "here and now," in this moment, and not "in a few weeks or months." The problem is also that there are not enough crisis settlements or other settlements where children who need protection can be settled. But, on the other hand, all interviewed children stated that their experience of the protection process was positive, and the conduct of professionals who endeavoured to protect them was assessed as supportive and helpful. Among other things, they mentioned assistance with accommodations provided by social workers at CSW or the crisis centre, their help with getting in touch and maintaining contacts with the family, and with understanding judicial procedures, their advocacy, re-directing of attention to issues that were not related to the traumatic event to alleviate the situation, etc. They also stressed that they were able to discuss with social workers their anxieties, difficulties, and possible solutions. In addition to providing relief and taking off some burden from their shoulders, this also enabled them to have a new perspective on their personal experience:

Yes, I went to a psychologist for some treatments and that helped me an awful lot to accept the fact that shit happens, that I had to be in the crisis centre, to face it, because he wasn't going to change. But, I could change my view of the whole situation and not give in to desperation. (15)⁸

They found it important that professionals at CSW acted promptly, were responsive and accessible when they needed protection, as well as later when they needed support and help. They appreciated their role in boosting their strength, their empathy, interest in them (e.g., they visited the children several times while they were in the crisis centre, called them on the phone, and so on), and their helping them with maintaining hope.

It's truly a big bravo for the crisis centre, because the entire team was really amazing. Because without them, I don't know, I think I'd be six feet under by now, I'd given up on my life, but they don't, they support you, give you stability, and so on. Like a plant flattened by a storm and then they put it upright again, and water it, and fertilise it, put some fertilizer, and things like that. (15)

The children also found it helpful that they received plenty of information on protection procedures itself. Information was usually provided by professionals with whom they collaborated, and in some cases by family members. Three children also pointed out that school was a safety factor (e.g., through an adjusted school programme).

This relates to the findings of participants in the focus groups. They pointed out that for sure there are also lots of good practices in child protection procedures, but the problem that needs to be addressed is that good practices are not connected with the system as a whole. They are too often dependent on an individual professional and on his/her personal commitment.

All children found that after the institutional intervention the violence stopped. Two children said that informal support from family members who were not involved in the violence was of great help. The opportunity to talk was stressed as very important, and they stated that during the protection procedure children need a lot of conversations, and they stressed the importance of conversations aimed at processing the violent experience and handling anger. Also, the participants of the focus groups recognised conversations in which children can express their thoughts and feelings, and are heard and taken into account as a key factor of effective protection procedures. Professionals must have knowledge of how to talk with a child in a way that the child feels safe. In contrast, they pointed out that the system does not really support long-lasting helping processes of, it is more focused on short-term counselling. There are systemic barriers in all sectors (social affairs, health, education, police, etc.) connected with an insufficient amount of employees, time, and space, so that professionals could support children properly in the protection procedures.

Although all the children involved in the research saw the protection process as truly providing protection, we should not overlook the fact that all participants stressed it was neither supportive nor helpful when they had to repeat several times, all the details of the traumatic experience during police interviews and in court. It was seen as re-traumatization and an obstacle in life. Accordingly, they wished the statements they provided were reduced to the minimum necessary for the procedure to be carried out. The participants of focus groups also pointed out the problem of repeating statements to dif-

⁸ The interviews were transcribed and then coded: the statements of participants were marked by the consecutive number of the interviewee (e.g., interviewee one: I1).

ferent professionals. In their opinion, especially the processes in court, are too long and causes additional re-traumatisation and disables effective child recovery.

Some participants of the focus groups and some children also complained about the response of certain institutions, i.e. adults to a child's experience of violence, because they either did not note it, or failed to do anything about it. In this regard, the children mentioned a school consultant, a teacher, and/or a physician who shifted the responsibility of ensuring protection (along the lines of: "if you do not want to report it, we cannot do anything") back to the child or another institution.

When I went to hospital with my mum, when I had...I don't know what it was. So the doctor asked me where I got those scars, she saw my back and collarbone. R: The injuries were caused by your step-father? (I6): Yes. R: And she didn't realise that violence was the reason? (I6): Well, no. I exchanged glances with my mum and we described a bit, or suggested that not all was well at home, and she said that we should visit a psychiatrist. R: And she did not report it to the police? (I6): No, she gave me a referral for a psychotherapist or a psychiatrist, and she said that we should have a talk there. (I6)

Participants in the focus groups felt that all the institutions have to take into account two rules when it comes to violence against children: taking action immediately and zero tolerance of violence. However, they stressed that there are still cases when institutions do not report violence because they do not want to have "a bad reputation of taking children away from families." For example, they mentioned in the maternity hospital that when it was necessary to protect a child they suggested doing this outside the hospital so as not to have stigma of an institution where children are taken away from families.

One child pointed out that the lack of support on the part of the parent who was not involved in the violence, and another one found it unhelpful that she herself rather than the perpetrator had to move from the family environment. Furthermore, it was not helpful having been in the same room as the perpetrator in court. This problem was not directly addressed in the focus groups, but participants pointed out that there is still too little sensitization of professionals about violence against children (e.g., practices where children are forced to have contacts with a violent parent).

5.2 Children's Influence on the Child Protection Process

Most children described their role as active when talking about their options of influencing the process. They most often mentioned their experience of life in the crisis centres

and residential homes for youngsters, the option of spending the weekend with families, and conversations with their parents. They emphasised the personal and respectful attitude of professionals and their trusting relationship. Knowing that professional workers were willing to listen to them and take into account their opinions when taking important decisions, made them feel safe, and encouraged them to express their wishes, opinions, and needs.

It was okay for me that they didn't push me to go to the residential home for youngsters, they actually listened to me, to what I wanted. (I1)

Giving children a voice and taking into account what they say is also important in judicial procedures. One respondent especially stressed that it was helpful when the judge took his wishes into account when delivering his/her sentence.

Some respondents stated that they were informed about all decisions taken, and were asked for their consent, as well as that professionals always took into account their opinion. However, a glance at their other answers reveals that this was not completely true. For instance, most of them perceived their placement in the crisis centre as an inevitable move which they could not influence. Similarly, decisions that were made within the crisis centre itself, particularly those relating to house rules, could not be influenced. The same holds true of police interviews and court proceedings – some respondents stated that they could not influence those, that their opinions and wishes were not taken into account, and that all they could do was answer questions. They explained this by the rules of procedures, which the institutions in question had to observe.

The extent of influence a child can exert also depends on the child's age. One respondent who received protection on two occasions at different stages of her life, said that she could influence decisions as an adolescent, but as a child (when her mother took all decisions), she was only a passive participant in the process. Some respondents could not withdraw the report of violence, although they wanted to.

Yes, I told them in the CC (Crisis Centre, note by the authors) that I didn't want to report it, but they insisted that a notification must be sent. Then in the Mladinski dom (residential home for youngsters, note by the authors), I again said that I wanted the notification to be withdrawn, but they said it was not possible, that it was for my own sake, that it was done for my benefit. So I thought that it was really true, that I couldn't influence it. (I3)

One respondent stressed that he could not influence his step-father's presence during talks.

When I asked relevant institutions to speak alone to my mum first, my step-father always insisted in being present, too. And nobody said that he couldn't. (I6)

It came to light later during the interview that he did manage to influence the situation and achieve the delay of the conversation, i.e. exclusion of the step-father, but it is interesting that it happened primarily thanks to his mother's intervention rather than that of the professional who allegedly did not have sufficient authorisation to prevent the step-father from participating in the conversations.

It happened once or twice, then I told my mum that I really didn't want him to be present, and then mum said okay, and then he didn't come any more. R: That means that your mum arranged it, not the workers at the centre? (I6): My mother more than them. He anyway didn't take them seriously. My step-father didn't much listen to them, or take them into account. (I6)

During the stage when children gathered the courage to talk about violence with an adult person, two of them did not have the chance to influence the developments. In those cases, the adults reported violence without taking into account the children's wishes.

And when I got fed up with it, I called grandma and showed her my back, how it looked and I told her, and then she said let's go to the police. At first, I didn't want to start that procedure in the middle of the school year, and all that, so I told her to wait a bit with it. But grandma didn't listen, and two weeks later she reported it. (I6)

In this case, the child's opinion was not heeded nor taken into account, but this could be ascribed to the fact that the primary task of the adult person was to protect the child. This brings up another important question – the one about the need to help children with the anxiety they experience when violence is reported. They usually cannot influence the decision to report violence, but the process is set in motion, and the ensuing support is aimed at protecting the child, leaving little room for discussing anxiety which the child experiences on such occasions. Their anxiety may remain overlooked throughout the protection process, may remain unaddressed, and can last for a prolonged time. It is helpful if children have someone with whom they can talk. Despite this anxiety, one respondent stated that she perceived the reporting of violence as a contribution to stopping the violence, and that in doing so she also protected her brothers and sisters. At this point we should draw attention to the wish expressed by some respondents that the perpetrator should also receive support and help, rather than simply be sentenced to prison.

To do it like now, call mum and dad several times a month to come and talk. I think my parents wouldn't get better if they didn't have those talks at CSW. (I3)

One participant pointed out that in the protection process, professional workers should spell out clearly the conditions regarding the stopping of violence which the parents should fulfil to enable the child to continue living with the family.

When my father was violent, social workers set a condition to my mum – to decide for a father or for us (children, note by authors). This was very helpful. And she decided for us. (I1)

The interviews also showed that some children confided in adults about their experience of violence, but adults either did not take them seriously or shifted the responsibility to protect the child to another person or institution.

The pro (school consultant, note by the authors) called and only said that I was in a bad mood, that I'd come later because I had some pain, and said to leave me alone. (I3)

In some cases, adults left it to the children to decide whether or not to report violence, meaning that they did not protect the child, since they shifted to the child the responsibility of not reporting the violence.

No, the pro (school consultant, note by the authors) didn't much talk to me. Mainly, the teacher talked, only once during the maths class the pro called me to come to her. But then she said that I could move from home, but at that moment I didn't want it. And then she said that if I didn't want it then she couldn't help me in any way. (I5)

Three respondents stated that the adults in whom they confided took them seriously, responded to the situation, and explained to them what they were going to do.

Yes, mum went mad about something here at CSW, and it was not safe for us at home, so we talked to social workers here at the centre about where to go, and then we decided to go to the crisis centre. (I2)

As we already mentioned above, participants in the focus groups pointed out that there is an increasing number of children who felt that they were not being heard in the protection procedures. They also stressed the need of advocacy for the children in such cases. But the most important thing is that a child protection system becomes child-centred.

The respondents stressed the importance of adequate steps that should be taken by relevant institutions to stop violence. One interviewed child mentioned the importance

of providing training (primarily for professional workers in education) on violence against children, and of raising awareness among the public, and particularly young people, about the domestic violence problem. Also, the participants in focus groups were united in their feeling that all professionals who are working with children need additional training about violence and children protection. They pointed out that there are more and more laws and regulations enacted in the past few years, but what professionals really need is a knowledge of "how to work with a child in protection procedures." In that way professionals would also be more empowered to use their knowledge. Participants in the focus groups also stressed the importance of preventive work, especially among children and youngsters.

6 Discussion

There are some methodological limitations of this research which need to be outlined before we continue the discussion about the results:

— The sample size of interviewers: the sample of interviewers is small and unrepresentative. As already mentioned above, the research theme is very complex and sensitive, and it is very important that children are willing to talk about their experience of protection in order not to re-live their traumas. When looking for respondents, we contacted different institutions (CSW, crisis centres, etc.), which can connect us to children who have experienced domestic violence. But, due to short-term duration of the project and also for the interviews, professionals from these institutions didn't manage to complete all the conditions to connect us with children (e.g., get permissions of child's parents or guardians, talk to the child what the interview is about, prepare the child for the interview, etc.). To improve this, we should start making contacts with different institutions earlier, or prolong the time for implementing interviews.

— The measuring instruments: questions for the focus groups were at one point too general. On one hand, this can be an advantage, because we got a broader picture on protection procedures, but one can object that we didn't manage to get lots of data connected with the children's influence on protection procedures. To improve this, we should also focus more on this aspect.

— Data collection: when making interviews with children, researchers were very attentive to make a safe place for children, so that they could also tell the things they didn't like in the protecting procedures. We think that we managed to do this, but one limit could be that we made contacts with children with the help of social workers who had a very good relationship with the children. One could object that this means

that the interviewers were more likely to tell researchers nice things about the role of social workers in the protecting procedures. To improve this, we should try different ways to make contacts with children who have experienced domestic violence, not only through social workers.

The analysis of interviews with children and focus groups with participants from different fields showed that children who need protection usually collaborate with various institutions during the protection process. What they all found important was primarily that the quality of the relationship with professional workers matters, since good relationships created a safe space for a conversation about their experiences, expression of their wishes and needs, and for their joint exploration of ways to implement desired changes. Gilligan (2007) writes that bureaucratized child protection systems generate crisis situations, since they cause alienation in the relationships between professionals and children who need help. This confirms the findings of other research stressing the importance of the relationship between children and professionals for the efficiency of help in the child protection process (Gallagher et al., 2012; Munro, 2011; Pölkki et al., 2012; Thomas, 2005; Vis et al., 2012). The analysis of the focus groups showed that professionals estimate that most children are not satisfied with the protection procedure system, but conversely, the analysis of interviews showed that children who needed protection from violence usually had positive experiences in the protection process. For them, only participation in court procedures and procedures at police stations were burdening because of the endless repetition of the same story that made them feel that their real needs and wishes were not given due attention. The problem of endless repetition of the same story to different professionals was also exposed in the focus groups, especially since this causes the re-living of the trauma (Cossar et al., 2011; Council of Europe, 2013). What seems to be critical is the fact that, in some cases, professionals are aware of violence in the family, but they do not do anything to protect the child, or they shift the responsibility of taking the necessary steps to the child.

Our findings show that children who needed protection from violence mostly perceived their role in the protection process as active, and they felt that they could influence relevant decisions, express their views, and that those views were taken into account. However, a more in-depth analysis indicates that this is not always the case, as it often depends on the age of the child (the younger the child, the fewer options they have to influence the decisions). We find it important to stress at this point the necessity of finding ways to enable younger children to be active participants in the protection process (Lansdown, 2010; Winter, 2010). Our analysis also highlighted the segments of the process, which should be reconsidered

with a view to developing new ways of operation, and new approaches to collaboration with children.

For example, the results show that children do not have influence on the reporting of violence (two respondents particularly stressed that they did not want to report violence or start the procedures that inevitably ensued – they only wished to stop the violence), but during the court proceedings they could influence the decisions. One participant said that she influenced the decision to remand her violent partner to prison, while another said that he did not want his violent stepfather to be punished, so the father was given only a judicial warning. Such practices should be reconsidered. It seems that children are burdened with excessive responsibility in deciding whether or not the violent parent should be punished – especially because the reporting of violence (which they cannot influence) triggers an emotionally challenging process and probably pressures within the family, too.

We should stress at this point that we do not imply that children should be burdened with the responsibility of reporting violence, but we think it is necessary to address their anxiety when the reporting occurs. The question that inevitably presents itself here is how to influence the reporting of violence; for example, how to modify the reporting procedure to reduce children's anxiety, who could support the child in such moments, and provide necessary information regarding next steps so that the child can have at least partial influence on the developments. The analysis of the focus groups also pointed out that professionals working with children who need protection do not have enough time, space, and resources to intensively collaborate and support children within the protection procedures. Also, Pölkki et al. (2012) emphasise that for effective support, social workers (and other professionals working with children in protection procedures, note by authors), firstly, need knowledge on "how to collaborate with children," and secondly, need time, work practices, skills, and practical wisdom through which children's personal experiences, opinions, and wishes can be better heard.

7 Conclusion

Child protection is a complex issue, and consequently the improvement of a child protection system is a difficult and challenging task for everyone involved. The difficulties experienced by children (as well as their families) are complex, and the costs of failure are very high (e.g., a burdening experience for all those involved, remaining in the environment, which is harmful for children's psychosocial development, etc.) (Munro, 2011). Effective coordination of all institutions involved in the protection process and communication among

those institutions is of vital importance (Antončič, 2017; Munro, 2011). Antončič (2017) states that in addition to collaboration of institutions and effective knowledge about the protection process, it is necessary to ensure that professionals receive continuous training and education about violence. The interviews with children and focus groups with different professionals in this study also highlighted the importance of the relationship between professionals and children, of conversation, understanding of the trauma, the handling of a child's anxiety during the child protection process, the role of children in the process, and their options of exerting greater influence. Adults should be constantly aware that children are not simply passive observers in their development. They are not empty vessels waiting for the adults to pour in their experiences. Children are active players co-creating their destinies. We should avoid the pitfall of overlooking the child's abilities, views, and worries (Gilligan, 2007). The child's voice should be in the centre of every process in which decisions about the child's future are made. The task of adults is to listen carefully to children's voices, and to take them into account without prejudices (Head, 1998). Taking into account the child's wishes does not automatically mean that all responsibilities should be shifted to children. Adults need to take responsibility for child protection, but they should not reduce or even take away children's influence on all important areas of their life. Therefore, we are once more referring to Loreman (2009: 118–119) who writes that it is necessary to find the balance between protection (e.g., from violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect, injuries) and creating space for children to explore and shape their own worlds (e.g., respecting their time, relationships, skills, and abilities), while we stand by them and support them as they advance along the path of growth and learning.

For sure, we cannot place a decision whether to report violence or not on children, as this responsibility must be undertaken by adults. But we can take into account that if children want to be informed about the protection procedure and its progress, they can co-decide on the time and way of talking with the perpetrator of violence, they can have a control of their life after reporting violence (e.g., organisation of the day). It is crucial that we do not let children down when we take the report of violence "in our hands," and that we support them within the process that is usually associated with much suffering.

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Izkušnje otrok s postopki zaščite v Sloveniji

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Postopki zaščite otroka v primerih nasilja, zlorab in zanemarjanja so kompleksni in lahko zelo stresni za otroke in odrasle, vključene v te postopke. Strokovnjaki, ki so v primeru resne ogroženosti otrokove dobrobiti dolžni poseči v družinsko življenje in zaščititi otroka, so pogosto postavljeni pred izziv, kako ohraniti ravnovesje med zaščito otroka, ki mora biti pravočasna in učinkovita, ter tem, da otroku omogočijo čas in prostor za izražanje njegovega mnenja ter občutij in da lahko vpliva na zanj pomembne zadeve. Pregled študij o sodelovanju otrok v postopku zaščite je pokazal, da so otroci v postopkih zaščite le v vlogi pasivnih opazovalcev dogajanja, z nič ali zelo malo vpliva na postopek zaščite in posledično na svoj življenjski potek. V prispevku so predstavljeni odgovori na vprašanja, kako otroci vrednotijo postopke zaščite, kakšne so njihove izkušnje in kako so doživljali intervencije različnih institucij. Vključili smo tudi poglede strokovnjakov na vlogo otroka v postopkih zaščite. Analiza je pokazala pomen vzpostavljanja odnosa z otrokom, sodelovalnega pogovora z otrokom, razumevanja travme in podpore otroku ob stiskah, povezanih s prijavo nasilja in s postopki zaščite. Vprašanje, ki si zasluži posebno pozornost, je potreba po zagotavljanju prostora za otroke, da bi imeli večji vpliv na odločitve, ki vplivajo na njihovo življenje (npr. poročanje o nasilju, sodni postopki, policijski postopki itd.) in pomen medsektorskega sodelovanja med vsemi institucijami, vključenimi v proces zaščite otroka.

Ključne besede: zaščita otroka, participacija otrok, življenjski poteki, nasilje v družini

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