



**W**ITNESSING **D**OMESTIC VIOLENCE AND **A**UDIT **E**DUICATION IN SCHOOL SYSTEM

**“The witnessing violence:  
definition and consequences”**

**(O1)**

**SUMMERY**

**Participating countries: Italy - Spain - Romania - Portugal**



## PREMISE

The purpose of this research is to provide an overview at European level on child witnessing violence and on the role of the school as an institution, where it is possible to bring to light many cases of victims of this form of violence. The school, in fact, is a transit place of almost all school-age children and where the latter generally spend a very long period. Although the phenomenon is widespread, there is no proper attention to a problem that affects millions of children in Europe. There is a lack of a common strategy enabling, in particular teachers and school staff, to equip itself with tools to recognise those pupils likely victims of witnessing violence and, above all, to implement actions to counter this phenomenon.

The research carried out by the partners of the WIDE project, conducted in four European countries (Italy, Romania, Spain, Portugal), along with a wider desk research at European level, highlights how different countries have promoted initiatives to counter witnessed violence but never in a deeper way affect education systems and, above all, without a common strategy.

The following report consists of four parts: the first, based on the current situation related to witnessing violence and initiatives that the countries of the partners involved in WIDE have implemented over the last years. Furthermore, it summarizes the critical points of education systems in relation to the theme of the project, highlighting the shortcomings in terms of knowledge of the phenomenon and adequate tools to face it. The second part, starting always from the detailed analysis carried out by the partners, collects those positive experiences made in some Countries and which could be examples to develop and share in order to create an effective model of intervention. The third, based on the findings from the first two parts, contains guidelines for the construction of the WIDE model; these lines are based on the design of a training course for teachers, and in general for workers of systems of education, on the issue of witnessing violence, with particular attention to relational aspects. The fourth is the collection of detailed analysis of the phenomenon of child witnessing violence carried out by all partners of the four countries participating in the project: four schools (L. Van Beethoven Institute - IT, Liceul G. Calinescu - RO, Escola Industrial de Sabadell - ES, Agrupamento de Escolas Dr. Costa Matos - PT), the Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona - ES, and the anti-violence Spazio Donna association– IT.

## 1. CRITICAL POINTS IN RELATION TO THE THEME OF THE PROJECT

Witnessing Domestic Violence, despite its poor social acknowledgement, is widespread and with serious effects on the psychological balance and social integration of children.

In Italy, there are about 690.000 cases, more than 60% of which are cases of direct witnessing of violence. Although there is not a unique data on the extension of Witnessing intrafamily violence, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights said that 33% of Europe's female population has suffered physical, psychological or sexual at least once in their lifetime; in two-thirds the aggressor was the partner: thus leaves an equally estimate the number of children involved directly or indirectly.

Italy, Spain, Portugal and Romania, are part of the States that have ratified the Istanbul Convention (2013) that recommends guaranteeing and giving protection and support to child "witness of domestic violence". Moreover, it proposes the introduction of aggravating circumstances in case in which the offense was committed on a child or in presence of a child and recourse, if necessary, to specific protection measures, which take into account the best interest of children and adolescents involved in domestic violence.

In relation to the phenomenon examined by the WIDE project, we must consider that child victims of witnessing intra-family violence represent highly risk students in terms of difficulties in connection with the learning processes (poor concentration, low performance, low esteem) and of possible situations of self-marginalization up to determine the dispersion and/or abandoning school. For this reasons, the plan of training courses for teachers in psychological and relational areas, functional to the issues discussed in WIDE, is an opportunity to broaden the spectrum of their professional skills.

Examining the current situation on the witnessed violence and initiatives that partner countries involved have turned in recent years, we can find a number of critical points related to the following aspects:

- knowledge of the examined phenomenon
- use appropriate tools to face it
- adequacy of the services offered within the education system

In relation to the first point, we have to consider that the statistical data on child witnessing violence victims is quite poor. The Italian system is still devoid of institutionalized and homogeneous information system for data collection, on maltreatment of children and, consequently, of an appropriate monitoring system.

This gap has been repeatedly highlighted by the UN Committee for CRC Convention on the Rights of the child, as a priority to which our country is called upon to give a solution.

This, in fact, not only prevents Italy to get to know and combat with the appropriate tools to childhood abuse phenomenon, but also hinders the understanding of how our country is positioned in respect of the European and international framework.

It is possible to derive indirectly some useful elements to the knowledge of witnessing violence by surveys on gender violence. In this regard, we can refer to the last ISTAT survey on violence against women (2015), which has enabled us to identify the specific and quantitative dimensions of the phenomenon.

In Spain, in order to solve such problems, the Childhood Observatory has set up a working group to learn more about the phenomenon of witnessing violence.

In relation to the second point examined, we have to underline that in Italy, this preventive system shows difficulties to take off, despite a few isolated good practices. In the most serious and obvious cases, the intervention is limited to report to the judicial authorities, while the suspected cases or more difficult to diagnose, referring to the presence of risk factors, are not available adequate tools to intervene. The services and centres that deal with health towards child victims of abuse do not have specific rules for approval and accreditation. A severe deficiency of Regions that make precarious the role of these services, often subject to significant cuts in recent years, and that affects the quality of the offer to children and families. Another critical issues lies in the fact that until recently, as has been found by the IRES Foundation of Barcelona, the interventions in charge of the victims taken were focused only on women who suffered violence, therefore ignoring the adverse effects suffered by children, who were victims of witnessed violence.

A further critical point is that the services on the national territory are not homogeneous: as far as the prolonged psychological support, some municipalities provide specialised services for traumatized children. In others municipalities, however, there is no services available and it exists just the will of the operators, that is not enough (for further details see survey conducted by CISMAI in 2015).

Finally, the Italian legal system (but also in the other partner countries of the project) does not contemplate a specific and autonomous types of crimes concerning the phenomenon of witnessing violence, in which the child is identified as a victim for the crimes that take place in his presence to other members of the family. Waiting for changes in legislation, witnessing violence remains an “invisible” crime and it also hard to find evidence of its occurrence: in fact, the police forces have a tendency to minimise investigations regarding witnessed violence.

In relation to the third point, we must consider that the school environment is one of the privileged contexts in which children and adolescents spend more time. It is important to pay particular attention to the school, as not only a place dedicated to cultural development and the formation of the child and the adolescent, but also as a privileged space for the early detection of childhood discomfort thus preventing abuse. The daily and careful observation of the child in one of their main contexts of life, in fact, can promote early recognition of risk situations and injury and, therefore, the activation of the social, health and judicial protection system. Prevention programs designed for schools provide training interventions aimed at the teaching staff of the school involved. At the basis of this choice, there is the belief that the school should also be a meeting place for the children, for their main educational and protective figures, however, united by the responsibility for their welfare. Unfortunately, there are no specific training courses that help teachers to identify potential victims of witnessed domestic violence in such a way that they can report to social services. In the same way, there are no training programs that support

teachers helping students to consolidate and increase coping skills, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-control and empowerment. These courses should also focus on strengthening of soft skills (social competence, skills in taking care of others, prosocial and empathic communication, etc.) to allow children and adolescents to establish significant bonds both with teachers and peers. Finally, teachers should help their students to use the problem-solving strategies to cope problematic situations associated with the phenomenon of witnessing violence.

The projects realised within the school context, and that focus on the training of school staff, must involve a series of activities that will continue also after the end of the project. In order to counter the phenomenon of witnessing violence, it is therefore crucial that interventions last longer and are not limited to the emergency of the moment and to funding allocated only for a limited period.

## 2. STRENGTHS IN RELATION TO THE THEME OF THE PROJECT

Examining the state of the art relating to witnessing violence and initiatives that Italy, Spain, Portugal and Romania have implemented over the past few years, we can see encounter a series of strengths in relation to the knowledge of the phenomenon and various positive experiences realised in the partner countries. These experiences are examples that could be developed and shared in order to create an effective model of intervention.

In Italy the recognition of this type of violence has been favoured by the commission established by Cismai (Coordinamento Italiano Servizi Maltrattamento all'Infanzia) in 1999, and reached its peak of interest during the 3rd National Congress Cismai 2003, called "Children who witness domestic violence". Moreover, Cismai in collaboration with Terre des Hommes, has carried out a research to quantify the phenomenon of maltreatment of children, on the Italian sample and with the collaboration of 40 Italian municipalities. The project research "Child witness of gender violence in the domestic context. Analyses of the fulfilment of their specific needs through the protection system" was held in 2010 and was designed to examine the phenomenon of violence from the legislative cultural, statistical and operational point of views. This research involved three Italian regions: Piemonte, Lazio and Calabria; chosen because they are representative of the three geographical areas of the country (north, centre, and south) and of the different welfare systems on the Italian territory.

In Italy thanks to the initiative the Council Presidency - Department for Equal Opportunities is active since 2006, the free number "114" which allows to receive requests for help and to collect data on this phenomenon.

In Romania, in order to protect child victims of witnessed violence, is active the ANPDCA (National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption), which also provides the statistical data to catch the significance of the phenomenon.



In Portugal there are a number of institutions, non-governmental organizations and associations that assist victims of domestic violence and their children. As an example, we can mention some of these: APAV (Portuguese Association of Victim Support), IAC (Child Care Institute), UMAR (non-governmental organizations), FISOOT (social cooperative), ADDIM (private body). These bodies provide a range of free services such as legal, psychological, social and welfare support for victims of violence. Furthermore, such entities are part of the national network, supervised by the CIG (Commission for Equality of Gender and Citizenship) that supports victims of violence. In Portugal, the CIG has developed a handbook of guidelines relating to the phenomenon of child and adolescent victims of domestic violence. This manual is addressed to all levels of education (from 6 to 18 years) which are obligatory.

In the partner countries of the WIDE Project, in the past a number of projects and activities in relation to the examined phenomenon were realized. Below it refers to the most important ones. For further details, please refer to the contribution made by each partner country to the drafting of the State of the Art (O1).

In Italy Project "Switch-off" (Anna Baldry, 2013), financed by the European Union, was designed to develop guidelines for the various professionals who come into contact with child orphans of victims of femicide.

Spazio Donna Association has developed over the years a number of actions that help to fight the negative consequences associated with the phenomenon of witnessing violence. This association has established a Memorandum of Understanding with the High School of Caserta "Alessandro Manzoni", in order to involve child victims of witnessed violence in different activities or courses (art, music, basketball, dance, football etc.) that take into account the attitude of each child. These recreational activities allow children to experience a positive atmosphere and a non-violent environment and help them to socialise with their peers. In 2003 Spazio Donna Association made in collaboration with the Municipality of Casagiove, the "School Contact" project that had the aim of opening a door listening to school for students and their parents and to build 4 workroom (natural science, lesson computer, English lesson, nutrition education).

In Spain, the Childhood Observatory has established a working group to better understand the phenomenon of witnessing violence.

In Romania there are 17 NGOs that aim to help children in need and for this aim they collaborate with some UN agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children. To give just an example, in 2011, Save the Children Romania involved in its programmes 182,000 children, 30,000 parents, 20,000 educators and other specialists and 1,800 volunteers. Some of these organizations arrange or plan discussions and debates on witnessing violence and children are encouraged to share their personal stories if they are willing to. They can get support from their peers, and they may start to



think in a new way about how they can keep themselves safe. If children are traumatised to discuss such issues, they can be encouraged to draw/paint and express their feelings in another artistic way. Another option would be using literary resources to help children with emotional problems induced by witnessing domestic violence. At institutional level, each educational establishment has a psychologist who, in conjunction with the teachers in charge of each class (called form teachers), monitors the welfare of the pupils in the respective class. If anything suspicious is going on, the school management and the psychologist come into play to cope with the crisis faced by a child.

In Portugal, the non-governmental association UMAR realized for a few years a variety of prevention activities in schools. The projects created by them involving children of all ages and of all the levels of education and carry out primary prevention activities. However, these projects also provide for the secondary prevention since teach children a range of skills such as coping, resilience and empowerment. UMAR also take part in Art'themis, a project implemented in 5 classes of basic schools with the aim to raise awareness and training young people about gender and domestic violence. This project is developed in a partnership with CIG and the Secretary of State for Equality and Citizenship and is implemented in schools of all educational levels across Portugal.

### 3. GUIDE TO THE FORMULATION OF WIDE MODEL OF INTERVENTION

From the information emerged, we can state that the child victims of witness intrafamily violence manifest discomfort in schools. These difficulties undermine their learning, putting at risk the whole performance and the opportunity to bring their studies successfully completed. Furthermore, the family violence can damage the evolutionary development of children and the problems can be transmitted into adulthood and contribute into the cycle of violence.

In order to counter the dropout phenomenon, understood as dispersion and school absence, we have structured a training program for school operators. The aim is providing them the necessary tools to identify the risk signs in children and building a path of support and recovery of victim's skills through cooperation among various organizations involved into contrast violence.



One of the main need of WIDE is to broadly hinder the consequences of child victims of witness intrafamily violence; live and grow up in a domestic violence environment undermines physical, mental and social health of the child.

Children who witness directly or indirectly violence have repercussions in relations with peers and in school environment, an area in which they manifest themselves learning difficulties in particular in language development, reading and writing.

Living in a violent environment is a traumatic experience that the child, if not properly followed, will fail to elaborate. This brings to implementing dysfunctional behaviours, ranging from the opposition to the rules and to structured contexts, until, at worst, to develop important forms of deviance. Implementing targeted actions to support children, allows stemming the effects of child victims of witness intrafamily violence and providing different tools to learn new and more effective ways of exchanging with adults.

We think that school is the place where it would perform actions WIDE aimed to integration of children in need and to early school leavers contrast.

### **3.1 MODEL OF WIDE INTERVENTION**

WIDE intervention model involves the construction of training tools for teachers in psychological and relational areas, functional to face the consequences of witnessing violence.

Actions specifically tend to:

1. Broadening the spectrum of professional skills  
(Direct Target)
2. Improving education outcomes for children and adolescents  
(Indirect Target)

#### **1. Broadening the spectrum of professional skills**

In order to expand the professional skills of School operators, will be organised a training course in each of the partner countries.

The training groups organised by the four schools that apply WIDE model (ITA, RO, PO, ES) will not be less than 25 among teachers, managers, administrative personnel.

	Direct TARGET	Indirect TARGET
IC Van Beethoven	No. 20 Teachers No. 5 School Operators	20 followed children
Liceo Calinescu	No. 20 Teachers No. 5 School Operators	20 followed children
Agrupamento de Escolas Costa Matos	No. 20 Teachers No. 5 School Operators	20 followed children
Istituto Industrial	No. 20 Teachers No. 5 School Operators	20 followed children

The Sample Selection will be made by school officials of the involved schools, which will inform the teachers during an official meeting.

The teachers, interested in the project, will send the request to attend the course and if the requests are more than 20, will be held interviews to assess the experience gained in supporting children who are living a social disadvantage. In addition to the teachers, the course will be open also to 5 school operators (including Administrative and Executives).

If the number of participants is lower than the table above, school officials could extend participation to others Schools of the territory. This will identify the ones who are motivated and predisposed to learning of a pro-social model aimed to carry out activities towards child victims of witness intrafamily violence.

The lectures will focus on the following topics:

- Characteristics of domestic violence
- Empathetic and non-judgmental listening
- Child abuse
- Consequences of witnessing violence
- Recognition of Distress signals
- Information on local services for the caring of the child victims of witnessing violence

- Reporting Procedures and sending
- Relations with the children' family and social services

In order to affect the relational skills of the participants, each theoretical part has to be accompanied by participatory and experiential activities, such as:

- Video
- Role playing
- Practical forms
- Simulation

Part of the ongoing activities are about the collection of information necessary for the evaluation of it. Therefore, it will be prepared a questionnaire for the collection of initial, ongoing and final knowledge.

Each meeting should be recorded on a form that summarises names, numbers and signatures of all participants, as well as the activities carried out and any notes to be added in order to monitor the level of participation and measure eventual quit of the course participants. In this case, it will be possible within the second module, replace the participants.

## **2. Improving the academic performance of children and adolescents**

### **(Indirect Target)**

WIDE includes the activation of the support measures for child victims of violence.

Simultaneously with the start of the course, it will be received the first reports of the teaching staff on children who experience school difficulties linked to conditions of fragility and/or witnessing domestic violence.

The children will be chosen based on their academic performance, number of absences and/or previous school dropouts and on known elements of their personal history (eg.

Through interviews with parents, reporting of social services, inclusion in the protection paths to children at risk, etc.).

Regarding the taking over by the specific services (Anti-Violence Center, the Judicial Authority Reports) will be identified the most suitable procedures. These aim in particular to:

- Respect the history and the privacy of children
- Have a non-judgmental relationship with family
- Maintain the relationship with the mother
- Ensure the continuation of schooling

Particularly for the children involved, it will be designed specific learning programs aimed to:

- Reduce the load of extra school teaching job
- Expand the possibilities for interaction and exchange with the territory
- Encourage participation to extra curricular workshops
- Encourage participation to fun recreational and sport activities

**Extra curricular activities** represent opportunities for those children and teens who have witnessed the domestic violence, and which are with vulnerable identity, low self-esteem, existential loneliness and apathy. The use of manual labor and/or technological promotes creation of opportunities to meet and exchange and, also, represent privileged channels of interpersonal communication in closing and discomfort situations.

The objectives of the extra curricular activities are:

- Accompany children to reflect on the relationship with themselves and with their parents;
- Supporting children in finding FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES;
- Recognise and support emerging personal relational resources of children/teens.

The activities will be organised by cycles of meetings in order to facilitate a peaceful climate, that allows to freely express their feelings and needs and encourage the participants'

motivation, self-esteem growth, the ability to express themselves, self-regulation, of autonomy, and verbal expression (language) which improves school performance.

The support team will be made up by teachers, who have followed the training course, and external experts, who collaborate with schools involved, in order to monitor the aid pathways and evaluate the expected results.

WIDE model allows to take care of child uncomfortable situations and to take prevention action in particular by:

- Indicators for the recognition of childhood discomfort;
- New approaches to the child expressing a discomfort;
- Operating Procedures in suspected abuse situations.



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