

8. Conclusion

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Today, more than ever, children are the cornerstone of our society, a society that has aged or is in the process of aging⁵⁸. Indeed, demographic data show that in the world, and in particular in Portugal, the level required for the maintenance of generations (synthetic index of fecundity) is below 2.1, the threshold that is considered necessary for generations to adequately reproduce. (In 2014 in Portugal, the synthetic index of fertility was 1.2, the lowest value in Europe; in Europe overall the index is 1.6 (INE, 2015). However, we cannot limit the importance of children to a simple demographic issue. Children are the seeds of innovation and progress, the basis of human capital that is necessary to meet the needs of a complex society like ours. If we do not take care of our children we are not taking care of the future. Children need to be cherished to develop their full potential and become adults capable of exercising their power of transforming society, contributing to the building of a more just and worthy society. But for all that, it is vital that children grow up nurtured on the principles of tolerance, dignity and freedom, to respect each other, to accept diversity and to foster peace and justice. This overriding principle of caring for children, protecting them, and indeed, providing special care because of their lack of physical and intellectual maturity (UNICEF, 1989) is set forth in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that:

Children should be given the protection and assistance they need to fully play their part in the community. They should grow up in a family environment, in a climate of happiness, love and understanding; and they should be educated in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, and solidarity.

However, we find that there are groups of children who, due to a variety of circumstances, do not have access to the resources which are indispensable for their intellectual, emotional and physical growth, and

⁵⁸ In 2017, Europe had an Aging Index of 20%, that is, the percentage of people over 65 years. The most rapidly aging countries include; Japan (26%), Italy, Germany, Portugal, Finland, Bulgaria, Sweden, and Latvia. (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.TO.ZS>)

as such, these children are kept from contributing to society with their full potential. According to data presented by M. Freire, quoting *The Lancet* (2007), more than 200 million children under five years of age are doomed to fall below their functional potential due to poverty, nutritional deficiency, and lack of learning opportunities. From a different but equally important perspective, it is worth noting the increase in Portugal in the number of cases of children exposed to behaviors that compromise the child's well-being and development (which include domestic violence and drug use). In 2014, more than 19,000 of these cases were reported to Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People. At a less global level, S. Rufino asserts that currently cases of domestic violence are the main problem addressed by the Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People of Tavira. She also emphasizes that there has been a concurrent increase in the number of young people who engage in "at-risk" behavior. The domestic violence that places children in situations of great vulnerability is not a problem exclusive to Portugal. It is a worldwide problem, and research in the United States shows that in 2003, about 42 percent of children were exposed to or were victims of domestic violence (Moore et al., 2007). Furthermore, children in households with domestic violence have been found to be fifteen times more likely to be abused than children in non-violent homes (Volpe, 1996). Domestic violence (either directly inflicted on children, or indirectly because they witness a serious conflict between parents) severely compromises the child's development (as reported by P. Piedade and L. Picoito, citing Machado & Gonçalves, 2002), increasing the propensity for depression and low self-esteem, as well as poor school performance. Intergenerational results are also produced, as abused children tend to replicate patterns of violence with their partners and their children (Laing & Bobic, 2002).

Thus, identifying children at risk and those facing neglect and abuse, and implementing adequate preventive programs (and remedial programs whenever necessary) are the major challenges of contemporary social policy. We cannot accept things as they currently are. We have to rethink the present situation with a view to transforming the world. D. Frey quotes Robert Kennedy in stressing the importance of looking at the present picture with a view to building a better world: "Some men see things as they are and ask, Why? Other men dream things the way they could be and ask, Why not?"

This risk to our children should be a concern for all of civil society and not only of international organizations such as UNICEF, OECD, World Bank, etc. And in fact, we observe a growing number of local and international philanthropic organizations, research, and policy institutions that are studying and developing policies for successful intervention in these issues.

Since Soroptimist International is an organization of professional women volunteers, who advocate for human rights and gender equality issues we considered that as members of the Soroptimist Club of Tavira, with our many capacities and resources, we could edit a book through (and with) which we could bring into focus the above issues and define a path for our involvement and contribution to society. Due to the complexity of this multifaceted problem, the issue of children at risk and in danger requires a multidisciplinary approach. In this context, for this publication we have considered different perspectives: historical, legal and social work, psychological, community, educational and the associated economic and social inequalities. In each aspect, we have sought to take an analytical approach and to explore particular cases that help highlight the major challenges and potential for action by civil society. In formulating a conclusion, our objective is to emphasize the main ideas presented here and based on these ideas to envision future lines of work.

In this book we focus on the idea of a child at risk, which we explore from a macro (socioeconomic-urban) and public health perspective, and then focus on children at risk and children in situation of abuse and neglect, from a historical, legal, clinical, and educational perspective. According to D. Frey, the idea of a child at risk underlies the idea of vulnerability. D. Frey identifies five areas of risk that are especially relevant to a child's healthy development: maternal factors, nutritional deficits, environmental contaminants, injuries / trauma, and psycho-social stress. It is the interaction between these risk areas and economic, social, socio-cultural, educational, nutritional and physical resources, which leads to greater (or lesser) vulnerability, i.e., to a greater or lesser probability of a healthy development (or not). It is clear that some children are more vulnerable to certain risk areas and their negative effects than others. Those most vulnerable develop psychological and behavioral problems, exhibit poor school performance, personality problems, and poor assimilation into the family and society.

M. Freire explores the issues of children at risk from an economic and urban perspective. According to this perspective, continuous growth and technological change, as well as the unequal distribution of income and increasingly unequal living conditions constitute important risk factors for children. In fact, according to M. Freire, in the wake of this unequal distribution of income and resources (material and spiritual) are children, many of whom are born into a milieu without the minimum conditions of adequate nutrition, encouragement, health, safety and stability. Biological and psycho-social factors associated with poverty accentuate the inequalities in the development of these young children, limiting their school performance and adult productivity, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty.

But the circumstances of today's world do not only affect the children who are in the most disadvantaged situations; these circumstances create great vulnerability in families, which is conducive to the development of domestic violence, leading to situations of humiliation, inequality and injustice that are very difficult to solve. Unfortunately, domestic violence is transversal, making victims not only among women but also among children, the elderly and the disabled. In Portugal, domestic violence is a crime according to the Penal Code, as referred to by P. Piedade and L. Picoito. The definitions of domestic violence are clear and legal consequences involve criminal sentences of one to ten years, depending on the type of violence and whether it is perpetrated against spouses or children.

This legal framework, although clear, cannot resolve all cases of domestic violence. To begin with, legal action requires a formal complaint from the victim. Often, the humiliated and diminished victim does not have the psychological stamina to declare himself/herself abused, impairing the autonomy of filing the complaint. Second, domestic violence occurs in the private domain of the family, making it difficult to intervene or to denounce neighbors within the community. The Portuguese saying, "*Entre marido e mulher não se mete a colher*" (*Do not stick a spoon between a husband and wife*) denotes the cultural acceptance that what happens between couples is a private matter, not a community forum, even if such violence can result in enormous suffering for the victims and the children, and even when it is considered a public crime (as highlighted by P. Piedade and L. Picoito). Thus, although it is essential to penalize these abusive behaviors, other complementary actions are urgently needed to alert the community, and to increase awareness of alternative programs that can help the victims and their children. Discussing the origins of domestic violence at the local level, developing re-education programs, prevention and social programs at the family level appear to be important and key measures.

The enormous impact of domestic violence on the emotional and physical development of children who witness or are recipients of the domestic violence is well-known. But what happens when, due to different circumstances, the mother is not present (physically or psychologically) in the child's life? D. Frey mentions in detail the influence that the relationship between the child and the mother has on the development of the child's behavioral problems, especially when there are few or no bonds of affection and love between them, leading to a lack of security, feelings of resentment, and weak self esteem, all of which gives rise to disruptive behavior. The child feels the lack of love and appreciation that the parents have failed to give him/ her, and this promotes feelings of anger, betrayal and resentment within the child. I. Castelo and M. Horta shared cases of children who did not receive affection and are lost in an inner world filled with unrequited love and anger, a world that is uniquely difficult to understand. This is the child who has gone through difficult life events, faced traumatic experiences, and tried above all to protect

his love for the parental figures, and idealizes a world of all good or all bad to justify his love for those parents who have abandoned him or made him suffer.

I. Castelo, with her clinical experience reported the case of Alexander, a child born to a young mother and a child who suffers from the successive change of his mother's abusive partners, to whom at times he tries to emotionally connect, only to be rejected when the mother changes partners or when he is subject to irrational violence. Anger, despair and betrayal are matters that the psychotherapist tries to discuss with the child, knowing in advance that the young person will keep within himself the idealized image of love for parents who did not want to love him. But the anger continues, and he tests limits and tries through provocation and defiant behavior to re-confirm that he will remain unloved and alone, and he even tests limits to confirm that his grandparents (and who knows, the therapist?) will also leave him. M. Horta describes the case of a student, Samuel, who entered her class in the last year of preschool as an aggressive student, who was simultaneously very withdrawn and closed off. She reports on how her intervention with the student and how, gradually, the relation she established with the student, an educator-student relationship, was fundamental for Samuel to establish bonds with peers, to feel loved and valued, and to lower some of his defenses and let himself be loved. However, we do not know if the changes were maintained since he, in the same way he showed up- brisk and abrupt, disappeared from the teacher and the school.. This case draws our attention to the importance of the teacher-student relationship for the emotional and social development of the child. This relationship is particularly important in those children who are most vulnerable and have the greatest difficulties. However, this case also highlights is that any intervention with these children has to be a coordinated intervention, involving more than one institution.

The urgency of detecting these situations and acting decisively is now recognized by most countries. This involves national policies on child protection, schools and preschools, parental education, and raising the level of social awareness of the fundamental importance of children's interaction with adults. Also to be highlighted, is the role of affect as a basis of intellectual and emotional development, the negative role of stress in child development, and how early interactions between children and their parents affect the child's ability to learn to cope with stress and other life circumstances. Compared to the social costs of doing nothing to reduce risks, corrective policies and preventive programs are not excessively expensive. These programs are measurably effective, not only from an educational but also from as an economic point of view. It is estimated that for every dollar invested in child protection programs, the return is between \$ 8 and \$ 12. This economic consideration should be another compelling argument for the

importance of tackling the problem of child neglect and abuse both vigorously and urgently. But cost is not everything. Sometimes the most important feature is a deeper, longer-term view for a healthier society.

All of this calls attention to the fundamental change that society must make to the current paradigms and initiate prevention measures. It is not the child who is responsible for being at risk or in abused and neglected, but it is society that has not provided the child with the conditions for the full development he or she deserves.

How can we invest and ensure that children can have access to the fundamental conditions for healthy emotional, physical, and intellectual growth? A steady and continuous effort by the community and society is essential. In particular, International Soroptimism, as a movement aimed primarily at the development of women and children, offers an excellent means of addressing this issue -- as difficult as it is urgent -- offering a unique opportunity to draw attention to the problem of children at-risk or abused and neglected. Action must be taken at the level of the family, the school, the legal system, and society in general, and by sensitizing ourselves to this problem and its relevance and urgency, we can start to develop the means to act in a focused and vigorous way. The contribution that professional women from a variety of disciplines have given to this publication, as organized by the *Clube Soroptimista de Tavira (Soroptimist Club of Tavira)*, is a clear demonstration of how important it is to share knowledge and experiences among other interested and committed people.

For further consideration and application of the ideas outlined here for the Soroptimist Club of Tavira, we could look into a deeper analysis of children in danger and at-risk and promote the discussion of alternative support programs for prevention and remediation at the national and international levels. We could compare the scope of the problem in Portugal to other countries and hone in on the intersection between society, family, and judicial systems to find a way to better address this issue.

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