6. Against all odds – Communicating about sexual violence

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The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (hereafter the Lanzarote Convention) belongs to a generation of treaties pursuing three main objectives: the protection of the victims, the prevention of the crime and the prosecution of the offenders. The convention identifies the measures that have to be taken at national and international level to achieve these three objectives.

Chapter 2 of the Lanzarote Convention is devoted to the preventive measures which mostly focus on the need to educate, train and raise the awareness of children, persons working in contact with children and the public at large.

One obvious assumption behind this set of measures would be that the more information people have about the problem, the easier it is to address it. We could indeed assume that, in principle, the only urgent thing to do is to inform about the various forms of sexual violence and to raise the alert on the risks that children run. However, sharing information is not always enough to empower people, to influence attitudes and, even less, to positively change behaviours.

There are many examples showing that people’s access to knowledge does not necessarily motivate a change in their attitude or behaviour. Despite all the warnings about the risks they take, people keep driving too fast, smoking too much and having sex without protection. In most countries, the legislator has to intervene for our safety’s sake:
limiting the speed on the roads, forbidding smoking in public places, regulating alcohol consumption and imposing the use of seatbelts in our cars, fences in our swimming pools or smoke detectors in our homes.

According to Article 8.1 of the Lanzarote Convention, “Each Party shall promote or conduct awareness raising campaigns addressed to the general public providing information on the phenomenon of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and on the preventive measures which can be taken”.

The point of raising awareness about sexual violence is very much about giving children and adults alike the knowledge and the tools to prevent, recognise, report and combat sexual violence. However, communicating about sexual violence is an exercise against all odds. First, because it entails demolishing the walls of silence and secrecy created by paralysing feelings such as shame, fear and guilt. Second, because we have to build it upon very weak foundations and with a lousy safety net.

The secret topic

This form of violence is nourished by the taboos surrounding sexuality. Most parents do not see the need to talk about sexuality until their children reach puberty. Many parents resist the idea of schools providing sex education “too early”. The amazing amount of fancy words that are used to replace or disguise the anatomic truth of a penis or a vagina is just an indicator of adults’ difficulties in tackling “the issue”. Children who feel adult's embarrassment are less inclined to put questions or to disclose abuse.

In its Article 6 (Education for children), the Lanzarote Convention attempts to conciliate government’s obligation to protect children through education with the need to involve parents in this task:

Each Party shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that children, during primary and secondary education, receive information on the risks of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, as well
as on the means to protect themselves, adapted to their evolving capacity. This information, provided in collaboration with parents, where appropriate, shall be given within a more general context of information on sexuality and shall pay special attention to situations of risk, especially those involving the use of new information and communication technologies.

**The hidden and all mighty monster**

The odds are that one out of five children may be victims of some kind of sexual violence. Between 70% and 80% of sexual aggressions are committed by people that the child knows, trusts and even loves. It is therefore crucial that awareness raising efforts do not create sterile anxiety or distress in either parents or their children. We all need to trust the people we love and live with, as much as we need to be prepared to react adequately if someone betrays us. Communication has to be empowering and avoid overwhelming the target audience with negative feelings.

**The unknown data**

The lack of comprehensive research and disaggregated data concerning sexual violence makes it difficult to clearly define the problem and the factors that can influence a person's behaviour (be they environmental, social or personal). This lack of information constitutes a handicap for the communication effort that risks missing the target. It also prevents parents and professionals getting a clear idea of what needs to be done.

Profiling the target public can be extremely useful and reveal some wrong assumptions. For instance, researchers at East Tennessee State University in the United States suggest that the fear of having leathery, wrinkled skin may keep young girls out of tanning salons and help them reduce their risk for skin cancer, more than the threat of deadly melanoma. Young people may be more inclined to reduce alcohol consumption if they believe they will lose popularity, while adults may be more reactive to the threat of losing their driving licence.
The absent safety net

Most national campaigns on child sexual abuse encourage children and adults to report abuse through a helpline or to a person they trust. A major obstacle to the efficacy of this message lies, however, in the lack of clear protocols on the way to report on and to act upon disclosures of child abuse. Unfortunately, instead of a safety net, children often get trapped in a complex web of proceedings and badly prepared services.

The Council of Europe campaign to stop sexual violence against children

"Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Despite (or rather because of) all the difficulties described above, the Council of Europe decided to launch a campaign to stop sexual violence against children with two main objectives. First, the campaign aims to support the signature, ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. The second objective is to raise the awareness of the public in general as to the extent of sexual violence within the circle of trust and the ways to prevent and report it.

The challenge is obviously immense, in particular taking into account the very limited resources and the geographical coverage: 47 countries and their diverse political, social, economic and cultural contexts. Experience gained within the previous Council of Europe campaigns (against discrimination, against domestic violence, against trafficking in human beings or against corporal punishment) shows, on the one hand, the Organisation's ability to mobilise all its partners and achieve important results. On the other hand, it also indicates a potential which is not yet being exploited, in particular when it comes to communicating with the public at large.
For its campaign against sexual violence, the Council of Europe will build on the positive experience of the campaign against domestic violence which counted on the support of campaign teams at national level. This campaign also benefited from the decisive contribution of the national parliaments and local authorities, thanks to the very active involvement of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. All bodies and institutions in the Organisation will contribute with their specific networks and expertise to achieve the objectives of the campaign against sexual violence.

Governments have been invited to set up national campaign teams involving all relevant governmental sectors (education, justice, health, social services, youth, family) as well as other key actors, such as the parliament, local authority networks, ombudspersons, professional networks, civil society, the business community and the media. Through these teams, we hope to make the Council of Europe input and material more country-relevant while stimulating ownership, creativity, information sharing and debate at national level.

The corporal punishment campaign has shown that investing in partnerships for the development of highly professional communication material was particularly effective for communication with the public at large. The positive, family-friendly TV spot produced in 2008 to communicate with adults on the need to educate children without violence was extremely well received by the public, encouraging media across Europe to broadcast it on a pro-bono basis. This very positive experience encouraged us to follow the same avenue in the preparation of the TV spot against sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse being a highly sensitive issue, we also sought the advice of NGOs with expertise in communicating on this very topic (such as the NSPCC, Barnados, ECPAT, the Nobody’s Children Foundation or Save the Children). The results of an expert consultation held in Strasbourg (December 2009) helped us to prepare the outline of our campaign. The next stage was to obtain the involvement of a leading communication agency with a network of offices across Europe. We
were extremely lucky to obtain Grey’s agreement to embark in this adventure. In the most professional and committed way, the team of Grey Amsterdam helped us to focus and developed “The Underwear Rule” concept, an animated TV spot, a website and a children’s book.

The Underwear Rule is a mnemonic, a learning aid aiming to help parents to explain to children that there are parts of their body nobody should touch. The products developed aim at raising awareness on the extent of the problem of sexual abuse while empowering parents and children to prevent it by taking a few very easy steps. We very much hope that this material will be made available in the national languages of all Council of Europe member states. Our main challenge will be to obtain the support of the key actors at national level: policy makers, parliaments, ombudspersons, professional networks, NGOs and the media. We know that we are taking a risk, communicating against all odds. But the potential gain is so worth it.