

Between risk and relationship: Involving fathers perpetrators of violence in child protection assessment

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Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in families with children and adolescents exposes the latter to potentially disadvantageous situations that merit the initiation of child protection assistance services. Following episodes of IPV, the child protection social worker's investigation focuses on the victim mother and the assessment of her parenting skills to understand to what extent and how she can provide protection and safety to her child/children. As previous studies have shown, the perpetrator father is less involved in the assessment and help process. International research shows such a low level of involvement of people reported as perpetrators that it is necessary to speak of «invisible men» in child protection services.

This paper illustrates a part of the research work carried out during the years 2021-2023 in Northern Italy, within 6 child protection services. Following a qualitative approach and through the documentary analysis of 44 social files of the child protection services, the research aimed to understand if, with which interventions and modalities, social workers, during the social investigation, involve men who have perpetrated violence against their partner.

Based on the involvement's indicators in the literature, this article aims to present and analyse some data from the research, offering a reflection on the concept of involvement from the Relational Social Work framework (Folgheraiter, 1998, 2011, 2024). The paper reflects on the indicators in the literature and introduces that involvement should be reinterpreted in terms of objectives and differentiated from the concept of participation.

Keywords

Social work, Work with perpetrators, Child protection, Intimate partner violence, Involvement, Assessment.

Introduction

In child protection services the power of social workers is most evident. Child protection workers operate within two main tensions: social support and control (Folgheraiter, 1998; Amadei, 2007; Raineri, 2007; Donati et al., 2011). The intertwining of support and control suggests that even in situations where there is a mandate for control, the support component must still be present. Without it, the involvement of social workers would be unnecessary (Folgheraiter, 2005).

This dynamic becomes even more challenging when considering cases of intimate partner violence (IPV), which often fall within the remit of child protection services. The functions of support and control raise significant issues for social work from a professional, ethical, methodological, and deontological perspective, particularly in relation to helping relationships between social workers and fathers who have perpetrated violence against their partners.

After an initial review of the critical issues highlighted in the literature regarding the involvement of perpetrators in child protection services, this article presents a study carried out between 2021 and 2023 in a province of northern Italy. The research is based on the observation that child protection interventions primarily involve the victim — usually the mother — while the perpetrator's involvement is minimal or non-existent. In the data presentation and discussion sections, the article explores the concept of involvement and outlines a professional social work practice aimed at promoting genuine perpetrator involvement in child protection interventions.

Social workers' practice of assessment in IPV situations: literature review

The risk assessment in intimate partner violence situations

Exposure of children and young people to intimate partner violence (IPV) is considered a serious form of maltreatment within child protection services (Fallon et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2021). In situations of IPV, risk assessment within child protection services is fundamental to initiating supportive interventions based on safety and protection from further violence (Fleck-Henderson, 2000; Waugh & Bonner, 2002; Devoe & Smith, 2003; Jaffe et al., 2009; Olszowy et al., 2020). Situations of violence require in-depth assessments capable of capturing the complexity of such episodes, including the experiences and latent fears of children, adolescents, and victims (Bourassa et al., 2008; Olszowy et al., 2020).

It is noteworthy that, according to many studies, the mere presence of IPV episodes — if not combined with other problems (e.g. mental health problems, substance

use, etc.) — is not always considered sufficient to initiate child protection interventions (Coohy, 2007; Jones, 2007; Kohl & Macy, 2008; Lavergne et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2011). This highlights the challenge of accurately identifying risk factors associated with violence alone (Hughes & Chau, 2013). According to Forgey et al. (2014), the lack of IPV-specific assessments may be since social workers often base their assessments on «practical knowledge» rather than formal training and research updates on IPV in child protection.

Risk assessments are typically conducted using standardized tools designed to minimize external discretion. Messing and Thaller (2014) examined the use of various structured risk assessment models specifically for IPV situations in child protection services. Their research found that the simple application of these tools provides insights that must then be interpreted through the professional judgement of individual practitioners (Messing & Thaller, 2014). This finding points to several critical considerations. First, practitioners must use caution when assessing cases, relying not only on assessment data but also on relationships and interactions with victims and family members (Messing & Thaller, 2014). Second, contextualising these tools is essential, as IPV-related risks are embedded in complex and unique relationship dynamics, making generalisation difficult (Messing & Thaller, 2014). Finally, the use of rigid assessment models risks freezing risk assessment at a particular point in time and failing to account for the evolving nature of violence and relational dynamics (Messing & Thaller, 2014).

The social workers' perspective: focused on mothers who have suffered violence or on fathers who have perpetrated it?

A review of social workers conducting assessments within child protection services shows that numerous studies indicate a predominant focus on women — particularly mothers — who have experienced violence (Alaggia et al., 2007; Nixon et al., 2007; Stanley et al., 2011; Hughes & Chau, 2013; Tutty & Nixon, 2020; Scott et al., 2021).

The focus is on assessing the mother's parenting skills, her ability to protect her children from partner violence, and her awareness of the potential consequences of violence for children and adolescents. This assessment is often linked to her ability to distance herself from the abusive partner (Nixon et al., 2002; Stanley et al., 2011; Hughes & Chau, 2013).

As a result, support interventions and programmes are also largely focused on the mother who has experienced violence (Shim & Haight, 2006; Stanley et al., 2011; Hughes & Chau, 2013). This imbalance is partly due to the greater availability of services and programmes aimed at supporting women rather than those aimed at men who have perpetrated violence (Stanley et al., 2011).

A key issue in the literature is the assessment of whether the mother will continue or end her relationship with the abusive partner. Some authors (Nixon et al., 2002; Coohy,

2007; Hughes & Chau, 2013) argue that social workers are more likely to end support interventions and authorize the children's return home if the mother is willing to leave the abusive partner. Mothers often feel that responsibility for their children's exposure to violence is unfairly placed on them rather than the abusive partner (Alaggia et al., 2007; Earner, 2007; Hughes et al., 2011; Shim & Haight, 2006).

A particularly important finding is that this operational approach is based on the perception that mothers are no longer seen as «passive» parents who simply endure violence, but as «active» parents who, like the abusive partner, play a role in exposing children and young people to violent situations (Hughes & Chau, 2013).

The invisibility of perpetrators of violence in social workers' assessments

Despite the strong focus on women who have experienced violence during the investigation phase, numerous studies highlight that the level of involvement of individuals identified as perpetrators of violence is significantly lower than that of mothers (Alaggia et al., 2007; Dominelli et al., 2010; Stanley & Humphreys, 2017; Baynes & Holland, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2013).

A study of child protection services in the UK by Baynes & Holland (2012) found that in more than half of the cases studied, there was no contact between social workers and abusive partners, or such contact occurred months after intervention had begun. O'Sullivan (2013) notes that conducting IPV research through professional interviews with social workers helped practitioners to become aware of their tendency to focus services on women who had experienced violence. This finding is particularly relevant when considered alongside other research.

An Australian study by Mandara et al. (2023) explored the knowledge and practical skills that social workers — outside of child protection services — used to identify and respond to IPV, particularly in families with children under 12 years of age. Responses predominantly referred to practices and knowledge aimed at supporting female victims, while support for perpetrators was rarely mentioned. In terms of interventions for perpetrators, social workers indicated that they considered it appropriate to refer cases to child protection services, on the assumption that these services were responsible for addressing the needs of the abusive partner (Mandara et al., 2023). These findings highlight two key issues: on the one hand, even non-child protection services tend to focus their assessment and support efforts on women who have experienced violence; on the other hand, they place expectations on child protection services to intervene with perpetrators — expectations that, according to the existing literature, are often not met.

These considerations highlight the need to shed light on the issue of engaging perpetrators of violence in child protection services, while acknowledging that numerous studies confirm that their engagement remains significantly lower than that of victims

(Coohy, 2007; Bourassa et al., 2008; Stanley et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2011; Smith & Humphreys, 2019).

Smith & Humphreys (2019) conducted professional interviews with fathers who had perpetrated violence to explore the relationship between parenting, violence, and experiences of child protection services in the Australian context. The study found that fathers interpreted their responsibility for violence in different ways, ranging from minimizing their actions to fully understanding their seriousness (Smith & Humphreys, 2019). However, almost all of them struggled to recognize that violence against the mother also constituted violence against their children and could have harmful consequences for them (Smith & Humphreys, 2019). In addition, fathers found it difficult to grasp that the intervention of child protection services, and consequently the judicial authorities, was a direct result of their violent actions. Instead, they perceived these interventions as limiting their relationships with their children (Smith & Humphreys, 2019). Many men were only seen as perpetrators of violence and not as fathers, which reinforced their sense of being victims of the child protection system (Smith & Humphreys, 2019). Notably, the study found that this sense of exclusion was less pronounced in cases where child protection services and perpetrator' programmes had worked together in an integrated and collaborative way (Smith & Humphreys, 2019).

Some studies highlight such a low level of involvement that it is necessary to speak of «invisible men» in child protection services (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Strega et al., 2008; Dominelli et al., 2010; Baynes & Holland 2012; Maxwell et al., 2012; O'Sullivan, 2013; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Smith & Humphreys, 2019; Heward-Belle et al., 2019) and more generally in social support systems (Ciccone, 2013; Deriu, 2013; Feci & Schettini, 2017).

The low involvement of perpetrators in child protection depends on multiple factors that develop at different levels of responsibility: individual, professional and organizational. Social workers often perceive men as a threat to children, which leads them to exclude them from protection processes (Strega et al., 2008; Brandon, 2019). Furthermore, the decision to involve or not involve the perpetrator depends largely on the willingness of the victim, who may not want him to participate (Maxwell et al., 2012). Another relevant factor is the existence of previous court orders that have already removed the man's parental responsibility, leading professionals to further reduce his involvement (Brandon et al., 2019).

It is not uncommon for perpetrators themselves to refuse contact with child protection services (Bourassa et al., 2008; Maxwell et al., 2012; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015; Brandon et al., 2019). The overall orientation of these services also plays a significant role, as they are often focused on protecting women and children at the expense of a structured approach to working with perpetrators (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Strega et al., 2008; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015).

Another barrier is the lower presence of fathers in their children's lives, which makes it difficult to involve men in child protection services. In addition, restraining orders and

precautionary measures limit contact with the perpetrator, making his participation in child protection services more complex. The lack of specific training for professionals on how to work with perpetrators further exacerbates this problem, especially in cases where the man does not acknowledge his responsibility (Alaggia et al., 2007; Stanley et al., 2011; Hughes & Chau, 2013).

There is also widespread fear among professionals of engaging directly with perpetrators due to concerns about workplace safety (Stanley et al., 2011; Baynes & Holland, 2012). The lack of clear guidelines further complicates the development of structured interventions that include them.

Finally, excessive workload pressures lead professionals to focus primarily on the immediate needs of the child and the victim, often neglecting the active involvement of the perpetrator. This occurs within an organizational system that prioritizes direct protection over a more holistic approach (Stanley et al., 2011; O'Sullivan, 2013; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015).

Involvement: boundaries and indicators

There is no single definition of involvement in the literature. However, the available studies and research make it possible to identify several indicators that can be used to identify and understand different levels of involvement.

Among these indicators, one of the most relevant is the nature of the contacts — professional interview, home visits, phone calls — between social workers and men who have perpetrated violence during the support process. Specifically, the frequency, number and type of these contacts are analysed to assess the level of involvement (Strega et al., 2008; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015).

The presence of basic information about the man in the case files of the child protection services is another fundamental aspect. This data includes elements such as date of birth, address, marital status, employment, education level, significant relationships, economic and health status, as well as details about the paternal family origin, the relationship with the child's mother and the child, the presence of new romantic relationships and any protection orders (Brandon et al., 2019).

An additional indicator concerns the inclusion or exclusion of men at the initial assessment, i.e. when the case is assessed by social services (Strega et al., 2008). A key element in measuring involvement is also the quality of the relationship between violent men and their children.

Another relevant parameter is the frequency with which men interact with social workers through professional interview, phone calls, emails, and home visits, as these elements provide an indication of their level of participation in the support process (Gordon et al., 2012).

Involvement is also reflected in the extent to which a man is actively involved in the design of the child protection intervention and in discussions about the child's safety.

This aspect has been emphasized in several studies, which highlight the importance of an inclusive approach in support processes (Stanley et al., 2011; Baynes & Holland, 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Hughes & Chau, 2013; Brandon et al., 2019). Finally, another key indicator relates to the extent to which social workers update men on the progress of the support project. It is important to assess the extent to which they are informed about the situation of the child, especially in cases where the child has been removed from the family (Brandon et al., 2019).

Methodology and research aim

The overall aim of this research was to determine whether individuals identified as perpetrators of violence are involved in child protection proceedings and to understand the methods and practices social workers use to engage these men in child protection proceedings. The literature not only identifies different levels of involvement but also suggests different aims for social workers' interventions.

By revisiting the phases of the support process theorised by Perlman (Raineri, 2007) and considering the specificities of child protection interventions (Raineri, 2016), the focus was not on the entire support process, but specifically on the assessment phase, which is characteristic of coercive contexts (Corradini, 2018). Focusing on assessment through the lens of relationship-centred assessment (Corradini, 2018) allows for an understanding of the engagement of men who have perpetrated violence in three sub-phases of the assessment process: initial contact/intake, assessment, and intervention planning. Based on the research aims and questions, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate (De Lillo, 2010; Amaturio, 2012, Clark, et al, 2021), using qualitative documentary analysis as the primary research technique (De Lillo, 2010; Arosio, 2010, 2013).

The main research methodology is a documentary analysis of 44 social case files from 6 child protection services. This analysis was carried out using a qualitative documentary analysis approach, which does not aim to quantify events or perform statistical analysis. Instead, the aim is to identify and understand relevant concepts and themes that reflect the perspective of the author of the document (Arosio, 2010).

Atkinson and Coffey (2004) emphasize that documents produced within organizations are an essential source of data and should not be regarded as secondary or ancillary data, but rather as direct evidence of the processes that take place within these organizations. Furthermore, documentary analysis is a non-intrusive and non-reactive research method (Webb et al., 1966; Lee, 2000; De Lillo, 2010; Arosio, 2010). Non-intrusive means that this approach does not require the direct collection of information from individuals (Arosio, 2010).

The social case file serves as a fundamental working tool for social services, providing important insights into the practices and actions of social workers (Raineri, 2007). According to *Consiglio Nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali* (2018), the correct use of social case files serves several purposes. It facilitates the correct development of both the helping process and administrative procedures. Furthermore, updating these files requires social workers to take time for critical reflection, organize their thoughts and document their professional reasoning.

In addition, the social case file is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, as it contains structured project plans detailing timelines and intervention methods. Finally, it ensures that data relating to individuals and social work interventions are systematically recorded. Through the proper use of these records, social workers not only track case developments, but also protect and validate their professional actions.

To effectively analyse social case files, a data collection tool had to be developed. The construction of this tool was based on the key research questions formulated at the beginning of the study and on indicators of involvement identified in the literature.

The primary objective in designing this tool was to determine whether relevant information was present in the case files and what type of information was documented in relation to the involvement of individuals identified as perpetrators of violence.

The data collection form was created using Microsoft Forms and consists of 142 questions divided into the following eleven (11) sections (Table 1).

Survey section 1	<i>File code and social file information</i>
Survey section 2	<i>Personal details of the person named as perpetrator of violence</i>
Survey section 3	<i>Personal data of the mother of the child</i>
Survey section 4	<i>Master data of the child</i>
Survey section 5	<i>Paternity between the person indicated as perpetrator of violence and the child; any personal data of the biological father of the child</i>
Survey section 6	<i>Elements and information based on which the man is configured as the person indicated as perpetrator of violence</i>
Survey section 7	<i>Relationships between the person indicated as perpetrator of violence and child/ and the mother of the child/children</i>
Survey section 8	<i>Assessment: professional contacts and instruments</i>
Survey section 9	<i>Assessments</i>
Survey section 10	<i>Interventions</i>
Survey section 11	<i>Assessment outcome and project proposal</i>

Table 1 Sections of survey form

The survey collected qualitative data, i.e. textual sections of documents. In the initial phase of the analysis, it was necessary to convert this qualitative data into quantitative data for counting purposes. This process involved analysing individual questions from the data collection form to identify emerging concepts inductively, and then constructing a matrix of labels and corresponding values. The same matrix construction process was applied to questions that required binary responses or choices from a closed list.

The second phase of data analysis involved qualitative content analysis (De Lillo, 2010; Arosio, 2010, 2013) of excerpts from the social reports, focusing on the description of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence, their perspectives and the conclusions drawn in the reports. First, text segments related to the perpetrator were extracted, followed by a thematic analysis of these sections.

The textual analysis aimed to identify emerging themes related to the involvement of the perpetrator during the assessment. This analysis was carried out using MaxQDA software. After an initial extensive reading to identify the main themes, a coding process was carried out in which themes and sub-themes were categorised inductively. A comparison was then carried out to merge or differentiate themes into mutually exclusive categories, ensuring internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Ritchie et al., 2003; Walker & Myrick, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The data were processed in compliance with privacy regulations and the research was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Code of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (D.R. 9350/2011).

Findings and discussion

Presence (or absence) of basic information, contacts and professional interviews: are real involvement indicators?

Literature review suggests that among the indicators used to define involvement is the presence of information about the conduct, number, and type of contacts between social workers and individuals identified as perpetrators (Strega et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2012; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015).

Furthermore, even minimal basic information about the individual — as well as the frequency of professional interview, telephone contacts, emails between social workers and individuals identified as perpetrators of violence — is an indicator of involvement, according to Brandon et al. (2019).

Looking at the data on the presence of minimal basic information (home address, place of residence, email contact, telephone contact, employment, educational qualifications, marital status, nationality, year of birth) on the individual identified as a perpetrator

of violence (Figure 1), it is possible to observe a predominance of the actual presence of such information in the documents examined.

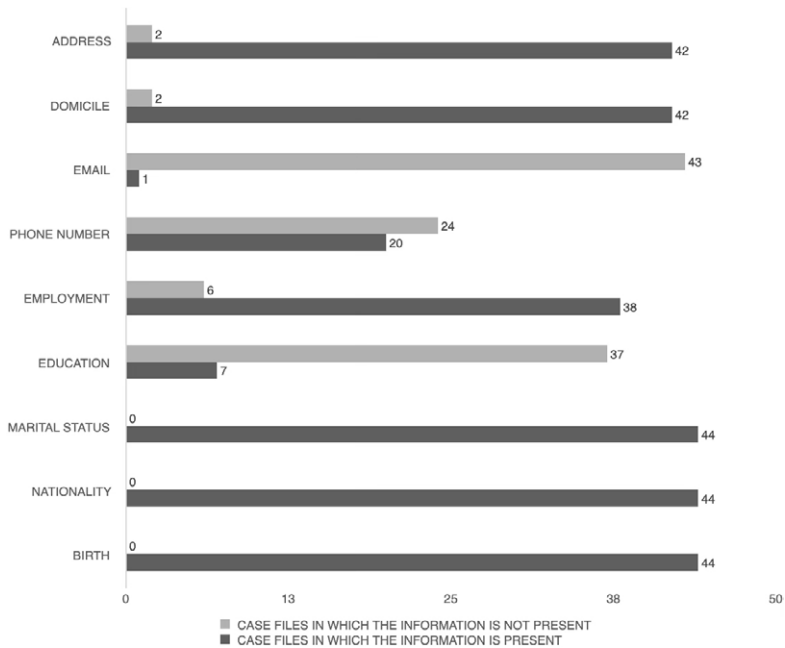


Fig. 1 Presence/absence of biographical information on the person reported as the perpetrator of violence in case files.

Home address, place of residence, marital status, nationality, and birth appear to be highly present. In contrast, there is less presence for e-mail contact, telephone contact, employment, and educational attainment. Taking the data on presence/absence without contextualizing this evidence in relation to the purpose of the involvement, can only confirm the actual high level of potential involvement of the individuals identified as perpetrators of violence.

Similarly, when examining the data on the presence of professional interview and contacts between social workers and the person identified as a perpetrator of violence (Table 2), it can be observed that in almost all cases (39) the social worker conducted personal professional interview with the person identified as a perpetrator of violence.

The lack of a clear definition in the literature implies a lack of full agreement on the theoretical framework — and even the paradigm — to which these participation indicators are linked. Without such a definition, these indicators and their measurement are only partially meaningful if they are not embedded in a theoretical framework that defines what involvement is and what its purpose should be.

	Number of case files in which the social worker has intervened (tot. 44)	Number of case files in which the social worker did not carry out interventions (tot. 44)	No information
Professional interview	39	5	0
Home visits	11	32	1
Professional phone interview	2	26	16

Table 2 Professional interventions by the social worker with the person reported as the perpetrator of violence

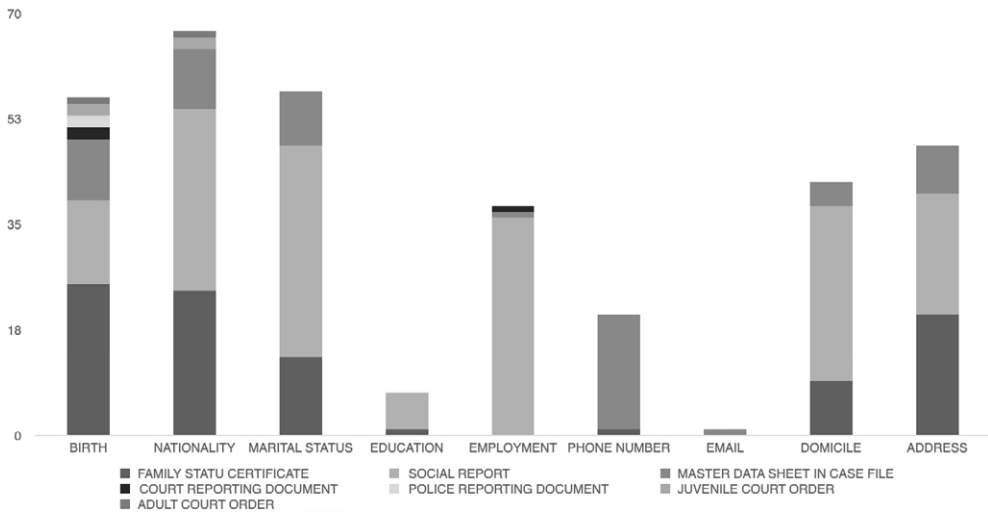


Fig. 2 Documentary sources from which the registry information on the person named as a perpetrator of violence was obtained.

In discussing the data described above, it is first necessary to clarify the theoretical framework through which the author approaches the emerging findings.

According to Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 1998, 2011, 2024), the helping process can develop through reciprocal relationships between the individual and the practitioner, with the reciprocal relationship forming the core of the social worker’s practice.

It is within this approach — and based on this concept — that a possible purpose of involvement is delineated, which can be realized in the construction of a reciprocal helping relationship, within which the mandate for evaluation develops, also assuming

functions of control and assistance, to which the social worker is required to respond in child protection services.

Defining the purpose of involvement in helping relationships, guided by the concept of reciprocity, allows us to reinterpret the indicators — and thus the data that emerge — by giving them a contextualized meaning.

Observing the presence of minimal information on the person identified as the perpetrator of violence, it is possible to integrate these data with those on the documentary sources from which they were obtained, as well as the nature of the data themselves.

Figure 1 shows that most of the information appears in elements (year of birth, nationality, marital status, residence, home address) that can be found in administrative documents related to the typical administrative procedure of social service pathways.

In this respect, Figure 2 shows that the sources providing this information are mainly documents such as a certificate of civil status, the personal data sheet found in the social file, orders from judicial authorities or documents received from law enforcement agencies.

The inclusion of such documents in the social file is part of an administrative procedure that can take place independently of any direct encounter with individuals, as it involves the sending and receiving of documents between administrative offices at the start of the administrative process.

On the other hand, the information that requires a personal encounter and a relational exchange with individuals (such as educational qualifications, employment, telephone contacts, e-mail contacts) is less frequent and sometimes almost non-existent (Figure 1).

The documentary source providing this information (Figure 2) is mainly the investigative social report, which is the primary document in the helping process, where a relationship between the practitioner and the individual should be established, and not just a collection of administrative documents.

About the indicator relating to professional interview between the person identified as the perpetrator of violence and the social worker, it is necessary to supplement the data previously presented — 39 situations in which professional interview were conducted — with the results of the qualitative analysis of social relations.

Firstly, it is important to emphasize that, within the Italian child protection system, summoning and meeting the person identified as the perpetrator of violence is both a duty and an obligation for social workers. This is because it is the very mandate of the judicial authority — which requires a social investigation — that imposes the need for a more in-depth analysis of parental figures, relationships, and context.

What is the purpose of involvement?

The textual data have made it possible to highlight that the social workers' observations regarding the participation of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence

in the scheduled professional interview are based on criteria such as the punctuality, the availability of the person and his level of cooperation.

These criteria can be divided into three levels. The first level concerns the availability and the way in which the person identified as the perpetrator of violence presents him/herself for the scheduled appointment, varying between punctuality/delay and attendance/non-attendance at the meeting.

Mr. Father's name always showed a cooperative attitude during the professional interviews (although he never elaborated on the answers to the questions asked) and was polite (T624).¹

At the meeting held at the beginning of September to discuss the latest events concerning the minors, Mr. Father's name arrived late to the service and showed an uncooperative attitude towards the psychologist [...] (T317).

Mr. Father's name always attended the scheduled professional interview and showed considerable criticism of the professional actions of the service, as well as being argumentative about the regulatory framework in the child protection system (T141).

Mr. Father's name has been punctual in attending professional interviews with the undersigned service (T39).

Mr. Father's name has displayed an uncooperative and superior attitude to staff during professional interviews (T934).

Mr. Father's name has had difficulties relating to the service [...] (P139).

A possible second level focuses on the ability of the person identified as the perpetrator to follow the instructions given by the service.

Father's name has cooperated punctually and willingly with the service, following the service's instructions, and respecting the conditions laid down in the decree. Father's name has nevertheless maintained a respectful attitude towards Mother's name and the operators, always maintaining a calm tone and never trying to force his wife's decision, except through telephone calls in which he declared his willingness to change and committed himself to being a better husband (T144).

Mr. Father's name, although he struggles to understand the framework in which he finds himself, has so far followed the instructions and accepted the proposals of the service (P96).

The third level, which is the least represented, considers the individual's willingness to invest in a personal improvement process.

¹ The textual data in the article are written in regular and at the end they present the code entrusted to the social file to be taken over. It should be noted that the text quoted is a verbatim extract from social reports written by social workers and anonymized during the transcription process.

He attended one professional interview in December, missed the first one in January and asked not to have any more professional interviews during office hours as he is unable to ask for leave [...] it is very difficult to divert Mr. *Father's name* attention from these aspects to more personal work (T32).

Mr. *Father's name* has shown himself to be cooperative, available and in need of being heard during the professional interviews (T140).

It is clear, then, that the purpose of involvement allows us to ascribe meaning not only to the mere objective observation of the occurrence of professional interviews, but also to the quality and intention with which those professional interviews are conducted — and on which the operators themselves base their evaluative actions regarding the behaviour of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence.

Adopting an involvement approach that aims to establish a mutually supportive relationship means that, in relation to this aim, the positively evaluated behaviour of someone who is punctual or who follows instructions is not in itself seen as evidence of involvement. On the other hand, if the purpose of involvement is simply to fulfil the duty of summoning and conducting professional interviews as ordered by the judicial authority, it can be affirmed that the degree of involvement of the persons identified as perpetrators of violence is both present and significant.

The documents analysed provided data on the assessment processes carried out by social workers during the social investigation. The main documentary source is the social report prepared by the social workers, whose purpose is to inform the judicial authority about the ongoing assistance process and to alert it to any risks, so that appropriate interventions and measures can be taken to protect children and adolescents.

Evaluation is also a central and indispensable element of the requests and mandates issued by the judicial authority; this means that the assessment of parental figures takes place in a coercive context that obliges both the operator and the family to participate in the evaluation process.

Beyond risk assessment for real involvement

An analysis of the literature shows that indicators of involvement also include the inclusion or exclusion of individuals identified as perpetrators of violence from the assessment phases (Strega et al., 2008) and participation in the design of interventions and discussions regarding the protection of the minor (Stanley et al., 2011; Baynes & Holland, 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Hughes & Chau, 2013; Brandon et al., 2019).

Looking at the data, it is possible to confirm that social workers devote considerable space to assessments and reflections on the parenting of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence, particularly in the concluding sections of the social reports. In

most of the reports, difficulties in the parenting of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence emerge. The difficulties described relate to harmful behaviours on the part of fathers, such as substance use, absence from their children's lives, denigration of the other parent in the presence of the children, and disinterest and difficulty in responding empathically to the needs of children and adolescents.

[...] The father does not comply with the care of the specialised services, [...] he imposes himself in the management of the daughters without involving the mother. In addition, the father has created situations of potential danger and harm for the girls, without accepting any responsibility afterwards (T317).

[...] he seems to have been an absent parent, with an irregular lifestyle and deviant behaviour (which he denies or minimises), which contributed to the end of the relationship with *Mother's name* [...] (T219).

[...] they outlined the figure of a husband who did not hesitate to use physical and psychological violence against his wife and a rather absent father, although Mr. *Father's Name* verbally expressed his affection and his desire to be a good father to *Child's Name*. [...] (T630).

Closely related to the parental dimension, social workers provide evaluations regarding violence; the practitioners devote space, both in the central sections of the reports and in the conclusions, to describing the approach and mindset of the individual identified as the perpetrator concerning the violent episodes carried out.

Regarding the relationship, the father's name explains that he had no problems until «the event of violence», where he admits that he was wrong (T317).

Regarding the abuse reported by his wife, *mother's name*, *Father's name* declares himself to be completely uninvolved. He denies ever raising his hands against her or the children (T621).

During the professional interview, Mr. *Father's name* constantly played down the situation, stating that the arguments he had with his partner were part of the daily life of all couples [...] (T624).

From the data analysis it was possible to divide these descriptions into four different categories in which the individual identified as the perpetrator of violence:

- admits responsibility for the violence;
- denies responsibility for the violence;
- normalises and/or minimises the violent episodes;
- does not deny responsibility for the episodes but does not consider them violent.

The next step revealed by the analysis is the relationship between these evaluations of violence and evaluations of the parenting of the person identified as the perpetrator of

violence. The data from the textual analysis show that social workers evaluate parenting differently depending on the extent to which the man recognises — to a greater or lesser extent — that his actions create harmful living conditions for the protection of children and adolescents. Furthermore, the willingness to question and problematise becomes a key factor in the assessment of parenting. The more the father acknowledges his actions and their consequences, and the more open he is to being questioned, the more positive the social worker's assessment of his parenting will be.

A critical analysis of these data requires us to revisit the considerations set out in the previous section. The indicator of exclusion from the assessment phases, as presented in the literature — considered outside of a theoretical context — is certainly observed in the data of the present research, especially given that the assessments presented above are based on a mandate from the judicial authority. However, a critical re-reading of the data presented above is necessary when considering this indicator together with the purpose of participation.

First and foremost, it is noteworthy to consider the distinction proposed by Harris (2011) and by Harris & Leather (2012) regarding the purpose of assessment between investigating to assess and investigating to assist — with the first category referring to an assessment process aimed at the mere act of assessing, and the second referring to an assessment process aimed at planning. Harris's ideas are here integrated with the assertions of Raineri (2016) and Corradini (2018) about the need to go beyond what is defined in the literature as risk assessment—that is, the assessment of risk that, in cases of active behaviour such as in violent contexts, aims to understand the extent to which children and adolescents are exposed to harmful situations.

Often, risk assessment is considered as an act «complete in itself» and self-sufficient in child protection assessment processes (Raineri, 2016). Focusing exclusively on risk assessment means not exploring the dimension of needs and agency of individuals (Folgheraiter 1998, 2011; Corradini, 2018) in confronting the conditions in which they live. Risk assessment is certainly a fundamental step in child protection contexts, but it is not sufficient if it becomes the sole purpose of the assessment process. Moreover, the literature review has shown that the mere assessment of risk — as well as the identification of the man as a risk to the development of children/youth (Brandon et al., 2019) — is a central issue in reducing the involvement of people identified as perpetrators of violence.

The data presented above are aimed solely at capturing a snapshot of the parenting and violent behaviour of the individual identified as a perpetrator, to understand only the risk to which children and young people may be exposed, or whether there is also evidence of assessments aimed at understanding the individual's needs and potential strengths with a view to improving this situation. In this respect, it is important to note that, according to the data analysis (Figure 3), social workers provide a high level of assessment in relation to mental health and substance use issues for individuals identified as perpetrators of violence, while elements relating to the assessment of social needs

and/or a deeper exploration of relational contexts — which could support the individual in potential avenues of improvement, particularly in relation to the violent behaviours perpetrated — are virtually absent.

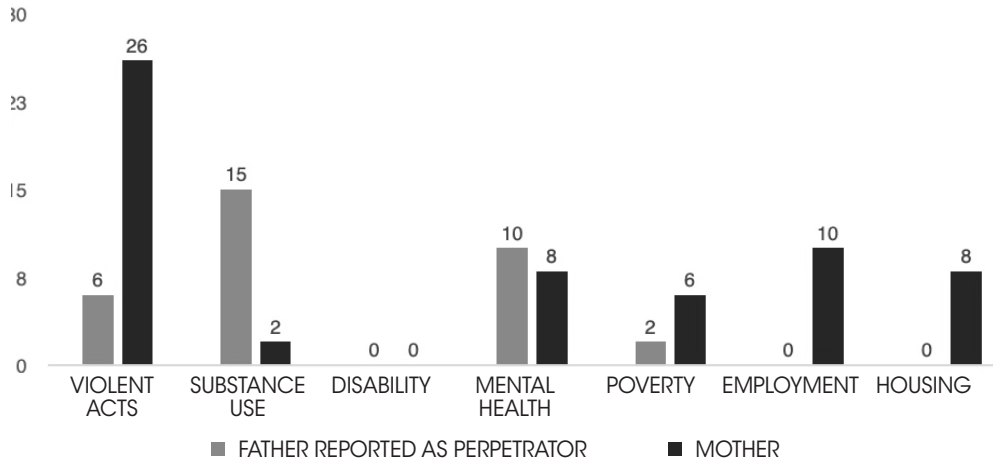


Fig. 3 Need assessed in addition to parenting; number of case files compared.

Similarly, the social report’s conclusions textual analysis highlighted the predominance of project proposals referring to the activation of pathways through mental health and substance use services.

[...] in addition to considering the possibility of a psychiatric evaluation to understand the personality structure (T213).

It also seems crucial to have his psycho-diagnostic and personological assessment [...] (T630).

An assessment at the psycho-social centre for the father is also requested (T141).

The service has taken note of the methods used by the father’s name towards the lady and the reality she is facing today [...] in view of these elements, the undersigned believes that it might be useful for the father to also have an in-depth evaluation by specialised mental health services (T32).

It is also considered essential that the father be referred to a specialised alcohol service (T211).

The husband should be referred to the alcohol service (with assessments for possible drug use) (T213).

[...] ask the relevant specialised service to take charge and check the actual state of abstinence of the father (P631).

Assessment of the father's alcohol consumption by a specialised service (P933).

The author believes that involvement and participation belong to different conceptual categories. One of the indicators of involvement mentioned above is the involvement of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence in the planning of the intervention. Participation, understood here according to Hart's (1992) definition as the ability of those involved to influence the final decisions, refers to a concept related to the qualities of a decision-making process. In other words, to achieve goal X with three other people, one could choose to do so through participatory processes — where everyone contributes equally to constructing possible pathways — or through more directive decision-making processes, where individuals are asked to choose from a few pre-defined options. Involvement, on the other hand, seems to be a necessary condition for participation; it consists in the fact that these individuals are called upon, are present, can take part in this decision-making process and, above all, are recognised as part of the relational sphere of others.

This reflection is important from the point of view of assessment because the idea that participation is only aimed at carrying out a risk assessment means that the person is only involved in a control dimension, without being recognised as an active subject among those who can potentially participate in improving the situation. It is not within the participatory process that involvement is realised, but rather in the preliminary dimension of being recognised as a subject. In the context of child protection, this means engaging with those individuals who, together, can undertake processes to improve their lives, their needs, and their suffering.

This issue is intimately linked to the basis of the present research, namely that violence against women is primarily a male problem and that the individual identified as the perpetrator of violence is himself a bearer of suffering, which places him in a life situation worthy of improvement. In other words, focusing only on risk assessment means not involving the person identified as the perpetrator of violence in the improvement effort, not considering him/her as an active participant in the process of extricating him/herself from the violent dynamics he/she has created — which are in fact the causes of the adverse conditions that trigger the initiation of the helping process. In this respect, the present work is in line with the literature in which Strega et al. (2008) argue that in order to achieve genuine involvement of individuals identified as perpetrators of violence, professionals need to assess and engage with all the significant men in a child's life — understanding that some may actually put children at risk, some may be significant positive figures, and some may embody both aspects of risk and positivity at the same time.

This requires professionals to have similar expectations of both mothers and fathers, to build on their strengths and to challenge them to change. Practitioners should not give up on disengaged or violent men until they have done all they can to encourage

change in them. In some social reports there are extracts where social workers describe the distress of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence and identify their needs for help and support.

The *Father's name* seems very fragile, with a past that needs to be explored and difficulties that need to be addressed to improve his relationship with his daughters (P95).

It is believed that Mr. *Father's Name* is in a state of mental distress that needs to be further explored. At the last interview he also reported suicidal thoughts due to the absence of his daughter, but he refuses to agree to a psychiatric visit with the psychosocial centre (T936).

[...] hoping for a psychological path that will help the father to face the «cycle of suffering» that grips him (T211).

For the father, psychological support is essential to be able to deal with his family history (T140).

These needs relate to conditions of distress, most often related to the current situation of being separated from one's children or the start of legal proceedings in one's life; in other cases, the distress is related to experiences from one's family history. Identifying the needs of the person identified as the perpetrator of violence allows reflection on approaches that differ from mere risk assessment. Recognising these needs lays the foundation for a helping process that involves the person identified as the perpetrator of violence as a recognised subject, acknowledged as an active participant in a process of improvement.

Conclusion

Starting from the research question about the perpetrator involvement within child protection services, an attempt was made to explore the extent to which this opportunity was taken up and even recognised. The data show that the issue of involvement is closely linked to the perspective adopted by social workers. On the one hand, it could theoretically be argued that perpetrators involvement can be present even when social workers do not focus on violence and possible avenues for improvement and change in relation to violent acts. On one hand, involvement may occur even without directly addressing violence or promoting change in violent behaviours. On the other hand, improving parenting seems inseparable from addressing the perpetrator's violent actions. To what extent, then, do social workers in child protection services believe that improving parenting includes changing violent behaviour? And to what extent do they perceive the father of children and young people as the violent element, i.e. the violent actions and behaviours?

To what extent do social workers in child protection services consider that improving parenting also means changing violent behaviour? And to what extent do they perceive the father of children and young people as the violent element, i.e. the violent actions and behaviours?

The data suggest there is space for improvement in encouraging social workers to promote change in violent behaviours. Two main perspectives emerge: one views the man primarily as a father, focusing on his parenting role; the other, less common, sees him as a perpetrator of violence. This distinction reveals a compartmentalized approach in social work practice, often focused more on parenting and risk assessment than on addressing violence directly. Instead, it seems important to promote a practice of child protection that is not only restorative, but transformative in a global sense. The comprehensiveness of the intervention necessarily implies a function of changing violent behaviour, as this is the only way to protect the child and create the space for children and young people to re-establish a relationship with the violent parent. The Istanbul Convention itself urges states to promote paths of change for perpetrators of violence in order to prevent new violence and to change violent behaviour patterns.

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