Interventions against gender violence and child abuse

Seeking to understand the impact of violence interventions for women and children across Europe, Professor Dr Carol Hagemann-White and Professor Maria José Magalhães outline their joint project and respective research aims as well as the benefits of forming international partnerships.

Can you begin by explaining what inspired you to dedicate your research to gender violence? What are the key objectives of your work?

CHW: After working in the first shelter for battered women in Berlin for three years in the 1970s, I realised that we can never understand – much less change – gender inequality in society without a long and close look at how it is intertwined with violence. My interest shifted more and more to studying how intervention approaches – from the first shelter projects right up to a European Convention – try to prevent or stop violence, often without recognising that the strategies chosen can reinforce gender roles and thus have the opposite impact to what was intended.

The challenge is to recognise the specific ways in which women are vulnerable without falling back on ideas of women as less than equal, lacking the ability to exercise fundamental rights. Our research is seeking strategies that increase the space for women's agency through an ethic of intervention.

Why have you chosen cultural encounters and their role in ethics, justice and citizenship as a focus for your research on violence against women and children?

CHW: In the course of monitoring the implementation of European-level recommendations since 2002, I began to see how the measures chosen and the way they work depend on historical and cultural traditions, so I have looked for opportunities to do collaborative research in more depth. My idea is that ‘setting standards’ will fail if this is understood as a cookie-cutter approach to the ‘right’ laws and procedures, but that we can move closer to effective practices by developing an ethical foundation that permits tailoring intervention methods to the cultural context. For this, a cross-cutting look at different forms of violence helps.

Another key focus of your work is gender violence in the context of domestic violence. Can you outline the Love, Fear and Power project?

MJM: The Love, Fear and Power: Pathways to a Non-Violent Life project was designed to deepen the understanding of gender violence both at a theoretical level and in a real-world context through the assessment of support services for women victims and survivors of domestic violence. Hence, the research team focused on the national network of institutions and NGOs that provide domestic violence services. Most research conducted in this area in Portugal had been quantitative assessments of the services.

However, the institutions’ rationale and the staff’s and survivors’ perspectives had not been studied. Thus, the researchers designed a qualitative study that included in-depth interviews with three professionals from each institution/NGO to understand when, why and how services were provided; and the co-construction of life stories with survivors to hear their voices and understand how they feel about the services they encountered when they decided to seek help.

Finally, is there anything you would like to add regarding your move away from standardised intervention?

CHW: The reason why standardised intervention can’t be effective is not just because of the cultural differences between countries and within the population – women and children can have widely differing needs and ideas surrounding what constitutes a good life. Intervention, after all, aims to stop the perpetrators from using violence and they, too, are not of one standard type.

MJM: I would like to add that there is an artistic dimension to the research in the Cultural Encounters in Interventions Against Violence (CEINAV) project. Each national team included an artist-researcher who made a valuable contribution to the findings of the project. Giving women and young people the opportunity to produce artistic works to express how they feel about the intervention – and using other ways to communicate their feelings and perspectives – were very important to access the survivors’ subjectivities and experiences. Moreover, we were able to understand other dimensions of their perspectives that we could have not achieved through interviews alone.
The CEINAV collaboration

A brief insight into the opportunities afforded by this international partnership

Professor Dr Carol Hagemann-White from the University of Osnabrück in Germany researches cultural encounters and their role in ethics, justice and citizenship against violence between women and children.

"Because all partners have developed their ideas in different intellectual traditions – and through engaging with the legal and social context of practice in their country – with the CEINAV project, we were able to draw on a much wider range of background knowledge and methodological experience than would otherwise have been possible. This shaped our research design from the beginning."

Professor Maria José Magalhães from the University of Porto in Portugal researches gender violence in the context of national cultural diversity.

"Our international partnership also allowed us to deepen the understanding of the challenges that less empowered women face, in a context of unequal power. Gender violence is grounded in structural power relations and the international research highlights the degree of effectiveness of the system of support provided in each country’s cultural and social context."

Dr Thomas Moyssen from the German Institute for Youth Human Services and Family Law researches child abuse and neglect.

"As an expert in child protection, the crossover reflection on interventions against intimate partner violence, or trafficking for sexual exploitation, enabled extremely enriching learning experiences. By trying to get to the bottom of unprecedented commonalities – and by calling differences into question – we achieved deeper understanding of the aim to protect children. We hope that we can give good practice a sounder horizon. Ultimately, our findings have opened our eyes to new horizons."

Associate Professor Viasta Jalulic based at the Peace Institute in Slovenia researches gender violence.

"Before participating in the CEINAV project, I was exploring theories of violence and empirically researching the topic of collective violence and international discrimination – mainly from a macro perspective. This cooperation has given me the chance to broaden my theoretical knowledge and do empirical research in the field of interpersonal violence (from micro and meso perspectives) related to cultural frameworks in interventions which will always be more successful in various European surroundings."

The Encounters in Interventions Against Violence project is a collaborative effort from researchers across Europe seeking to understand how cultural differences can affect the success of violence interventions for women and children. The findings could form the basis of future strategies in various European nations.

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