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DOCUMENT ON THE NATIONAL PLAN

What strategies can succeed in countering violence against women? The National Plan of Action against gender violence and stalking formulated by the Italian Government Prompts aimed at furthering actions opposing gender violence

The national association “D.i.Re contro la violenza-ONLUS” (Women’s Network Against Violence) was founded in September 2008 with the object of *promoting action directed at cultural change and the transformation of Italian social awareness of the phenomenon of violence against women*. The Association is made up of 58 NGOs of women who share the project's strategies, Counselling Centres and Shelters all over the Italian territory. All these organisations and individuals have amassed an enormous quantity of experience, knowledge, competence and research material on the theme of women victims of violence, supporting thousands of women and helping them and their offspring to exit from violent situations.

The Association has taken part (and provided important contributions as regards the priorities to be observed) in the meetings organised by the Minister for Equal Opportunities, Mara Carfagna, in order to formulate a Action plan against violence perpetrated on women. A document was presented to the Minister, which summarised the most salient requirements that emerged from the survey carried out all over the Italian territory, relating them to the EEC Recommendations as regards policies and action against gender violence on women, which have recently been redefined in the European Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS n°210)¹.

After the favourable opinion expressed by the Unified Conference, on 28th October 2010, the Italian Accounts Court (*Corte dei Conti*) issued its permission on the 17th February 2011 for the formulation of the first National Plan against gender violence and stalking.

“The drawing up of a Plan of Action against gender violence is established as part of the Government's and the Ministry of Equal Opportunity's actions with a view towards promoting and protecting fundamental human rights and equality among all citizens. The National Plan, by means of a shared course of action, means to involve all interested parties and envisages specific proceedings to be undertaken in the socio-cultural, health, economic, legislative and judicial

¹) On the 7th April 2011, the Committee of the Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#). This Convention is the first binding juridical instrument that sets up a global juridical framework within which the prevention of violence, the protection of victims and an end to the impunity of the perpetrators can be brought about. It defines and criminalises the various forms of violence women are subjected to (forced marriage, female genital mutilation, stalking, physical and psychological violence). The Convention was signed in Istanbul on 13th May 2011 by 13 European countries: Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey.

sectors “ (National Plan against gender violence and stalking , Presentation, Home web-site of the Italian Government).

The Plan proposes to start with the definition of Violence against Women adopted by the Council of Europe in its recommendations: “*any violent action founded on gender difference, which involves or could involve bodily, sexual or psychological harm to the women against whom it is perpetrated, including the threat of committing similar actions, any constriction, or arbitrary privation of freedom, both on a public as well as on a private level*”, choosing the document presented by the “D.i.Re” association as a starting point. However, although the starting point is a shared definition of violence against women, an overall national framework, aimed at the determination of guide-lines to prevent and counter gender violence, with the consequent lay-out of resources, has been extensively disappointing in its contents.

The following document presents a critical and detailed reading of the Government text, aimed at improving the Plan by proposing that D.i.Re take part in the decision making processes regarding the themes of which the Association is a carrier of experience and interest. The National Government Plan, so long awaited by the Centres and by the Shelters, is - in our opinion - a partial document, based on inadequate, if not total absence of contents, which should have been decided upon and shared with the Women's associations and specifically with the National “D.i.Re.

What were, in our view, the indispensable elements which were to be considered as starting points in drawing up a National Plan to counter violence perpetrated against women? Here they are:

- The principle that **women victims of violence have rights** and therefore all policies must respond to the qualified requirements/needs expressed by women.
- The recognition of the National “**D.i.Re. contro la violenza**” association as the competent and representative counterpart with regard to the themes concerning violence against women and of the **Counselling Centres** as specific venues for the reception and hospitality of women (and of their children) who have been the victims of violence, providing moral and financial support.
- The clear **definition** in the Government Plan of the **responsibilities, of the managing organisms, of the timing to be observed in all actions, of the financing, of the ways in which all proceedings should be monitored and evaluated.**
- The **transversal nature of all intended measures**, which should be intended to involve social, health, legislative and judicial areas.
- The **inter-ministerial format**, of whoever/whichever authority/authorities in charge of the policies to be adopted in the above-mentioned areas, to be coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities.
- All measures included in the Government Plan should be identified as **systemic measures** so that procedures are intended to be actuated at all three levels: national, regional and local.

From our point of view, the Government Plan of Action should be a systemic course of action, more specifically: a national policy to be integrated by the activities existing at regional levels (legislation, measures, orientations) and in step with local programmes (Zone Plan L328/2000 and initiatives taken by individual municipalities, etc.). This implies a framework instrument, which proposes certain priority actions, financed by the Government Plan and the provision of funds aimed at transforming all prevention, or contrast actions into homogeneous measures throughout the Italian territories to be integrated by all regions, in conjunction with all the Local Authorities, and consistent with European Community funding policies. What we asked for was the harmonisation of the various levels of programming and intervention, as well as the provision of funding for the project, in order to guarantee that it actually becomes operative.

The overall project, advanced by the Government Plan and itemised in its **Finalities and Objectives**, accepts many of the suggestions we advanced, but it is in the actuation of the project and the related intervention levels, that a worrying divergence from the above described priorities occurs. Moreover, no reference is made in the text to the sources, to the type and quantity of funding of the measures envisaged, including those concerning the **Counselling Centres**,

recognised in intervention Level 2) as the main venues in which assistance can be given to women-victims of violence.

We would like to recall the repeated reports filed by the Association concerning the difficulties experienced by numerous Centres - due to the lack of funding from local Authorities - whose strength is being whittled away to such an extent, that in too many cases, they have been forced to close down. We are firmly convinced that funds for the strengthening, enhancing and setting up of Counselling Centres should be provided for in the Government Plan, which ought to propose clear indications regarding an overall re-arrangement of welfare measures and for the suitable allocation of resources aimed at setting up coordinated and efficient actions and services specialised in countering gender violence.

Nonetheless, there is no mention in the Government Plan of how the local authorities are to be instructed to set aside resources and funds for specialised institutions (such as for instance those with proven experience over many years, those possessing specific statutory finalities, cooperation with a network of other services, both public and/or private and law-enforcement authorities, etc.).

Another proposal not included in the Government Plan was the one in which D.i.Re advises inter-ministerial responsibility for the promotion and support of Women's Associations in the provinces, which have not hitherto been able to set up Counselling Centres, by guaranteeing training and tutoring courses to be held by the people managing Centres and Shelters - providing they had been so engaged for at least five years - in other provinces.

The Government Plan does mention a vague support to be provided to Counselling Centres, without however specifying which choices to privilege, and including amongst the institutions selected to guarantee the safety of women, un-specified "public and private bodies", which are not even required to pledge that suitable training will be given to the people that staff them.

We are therefore concerned that undefined (and untrained) bodies be entrusted with the reception of women victims of violence, as we fear that this might lead to the underrating and debarring of Counselling Centres' specific, unique and irreplaceable role in combating violence.

For years, moreover, we have been expecting the State to recognise the professional status and professional qualities of an "operator in charge of the reception of women-victims of violence". This is a fundamental requirement in order to provide strength and credibility to the daily duties carried out within the women's Centres and once again, no response to this need has been included in the National Plan.

With reference to the theme of **Prevention**, the Government Plan envisages the establishment of public opinion awareness campaigns. More efficient initial preventive action should make use of instruments such as the production of informative material aimed at specific targets, to be circulated amongst the public, throughout institutions both public and private, with especial attention to schools of every type and level. Among other things, relegating awareness of the phenomenon to media informative campaigns and very little else, downgrades the significance and dedication that Centres have poured over the years into building up awareness of the problem in their areas, using a wide variety of means (leaflets, brochures, seminars, debates, film festivals, cultural events, etc.), involving local institutions, services, citizens with few financial resources and many results. What makes the theme of prevention, as handled in the National Plan, even more obscure, is the lack of any clear link between the various institutional bodies, which is vital for efficient cooperation in the exchange of information and good practice, so as to avoid the well-known problem of repetitive actions and the waste of resources - especially economic ones. Moreover, the Plan makes absolutely no mention of what we suggested, regarding the importance of involving men in the creation of awareness campaigns.

As regards the subject of **Training**, we find that no clear instructions have been provided as to who exactly should carry out the training of the operators, social and health assistants and the various police forces, there is moreover a lack of clear specification as regards the contents of the training courses. No mention is ever made of the need to adopt a gender approach to the phenomenon, or

of the advisability of taking full advantage of the training competences existing in the Counselling Centres.

If one consults the studies and surveys carried out in Italy, one cannot help noticing that there is still a considerable amount of institutional tolerance as regards violence against women (especially if it occurs within the home), precisely among the services which should ensure citizens' safety and suppress crime, as well as in the group of services which make up the main supporting structure of our welfare service (social services, medical consulting rooms, first aid wards, mental health surgeries, etc.). There appears to be a widespread systematic custom resulting in "secondary victimisation" of the women who turn to these services for assistance, resulting in the tendency to blame the woman for the violence she has been subjected to or to underrate its extent. Which is why extensive campaigns of awareness /training /up-dating in the matter of violence against women should be arranged for the health operators (doctors, nursing staff, paediatricians, psychologists) for social operators (social assistants, teachers, educational staff), both at a public as well as at a private level, and for judiciary operators and law enforcement forces, so as to increase the competence of whoever is working in the field and prevent processes of secondary violence from being committed within the services. One of the aspects the Government Plan stresses is the fundamental - albeit not exhaustive role of training in the Law Enforcement forces and Judiciary, leaving all the other above-described sectors of intervention in a kind of greyish, undefined area. Among other things no mention is made or reference to the value of the work carried out by the integrated network of Women's associations in the various territories which has brought about an efficient working model and increasingly thorough transmission to the public and private territorial agencies of knowledge, competence, and good and suitable practice, capable of responding to the needs of women living in violent situations.

Another area which does not respond to the needs expressed in the suggestions advanced by D.i.Re is the section which describes the action required for the development of **Data Banks**. We had strongly recommended the preparation, at least at four year intervals, of the ISTAT survey regarding the phenomenon of violence and ill treatment inflicted on women and the development of research action, starting from the figures provided by the national telephone help number for violence against women 1522. We had, among other things suggested that research, even on a quality level, should provide indications as to the needs, distress, problems linked to the theme, by making use of the existing research and studies on this subject.

We believe, in fact that quantitative and qualitative collection of data, carried out by means of research and studies and the establishment of a national survey system on social, health and security levels is absolutely vital, as already demonstrated in other European countries, if one wishes to obtain reliable data on the phenomenon, thus promoting programmes of efficient policies. The Government Plan focuses solely on the Law Enforcement forces and on Emergency wards as sources of data, proposing valuable surveys, which however would be partial and inefficient, if one considers that only 10% of the women-victims of violence (ISTAT Survey 2010) ask the Law Enforcement forces to intervene.

This sourcing would be even more inadequate, in the absence of a homogenous survey system, of periodical national surveys and of an **Observatory** whose responsibility would be to collect and monitor the adequacy of instruments and results, and of the research and gender-oriented studies on the subject. The Observatory, already provided for in the 2007 Budget, should be included in the National Plan of Action as the necessary premise for an overall appreciation and survey of the Italian situation as regards violence perpetrated against women. It would promote more thorough acquisition of knowledge of the phenomenon by the implementation of data and of data collection instruments, such as for instance, in the field of crime data, of health related data, etc. It is absolutely necessary that Counselling Centres contribute their expertise and competence to the Observatory, together with other experts capable of contributing towards the overall picture of the problems that emerge.

To conclude, a great number of the actions, suggested in our 2009 Proposal, during the preparatory meetings leading up to the issue of a National Plan of Action, have already been put

into practice by our Counselling Centres and Shelters, especially in the fields of Education, Health, Training, Regional and Provincial Observatories, the assembly of Data and special research programmes, which have led to a deal of literature on the subject being published.

The meeting of the D.i.Re Association Legal Consultants with the Upper Council of Magistrates (*Consiglio Superiore della Magistratura*) has managed to shed much light on areas of possible cooperation in the juridical sector. Many actions have been carried out by D.i.Re member associations both on a National as well as on a European level, by making use of appropriate finance programmes (Daphne, Agis, Antiviolence network amongst the Urban cities in Italy (*Antiviolenza tra le città Urban Italia*)) and very often such actions have been directly initiated by Counselling Centres who promoted specific projects, for which private sponsorship was raised. Moreover, Government initiatives, developed over the past 12 years, have been made to work, increasing local activities, developing knowledge and awareness, supporting the emergence of the phenomenon by cooperating with locally active services, and especially with Counselling Centres. All of which activities and knowledge should be made use of in drawing up the first Italian National Action Plan.

For years, Counselling Centres/Shelters and the women directly involved within them have been asking for a National Programme, aimed at establishing resources and the definition of guide-lines and standards in preventing and countering violence throughout the entire Italian territory, to bridge the gap that exists between the local realities and to support, by means of legislation and implementation regulations, the activity of the Centres, which in many parts of Italy risk annihilation due to the lack of financing, as they are often only supported by the efforts of heroically untiring volunteers. It is for the achievement of these ends, that like many other countries, both within the European Union and outside it, recognition be given to the problem, as well as awarding significance to over twenty years of efforts in this very specific field, which is based on the conviction that violence against women is the typical cultural outcome of a patriarchal society. It is however in tackling the relationship between sexes and thus the intimate relationships existing between man and wife, that special attention must be paid to the gender aspect. These fundamental ingredients are the most cogent in contrasting violence against women, which have led the Counselling Centres to receive over 10,000 women-victims a year, building up enormous knowledge and professional capacities in the field.

Our hope that the Government Plan would become a national system of actions, strongly integrated and interacting with regional and local programming, a coherent follow-up of the studies and research on the phenomenon carried out and developed at a national and European level has been massively disappointed. The same can be said regarding our hope that the State would adopt an instrument to be used in intervening and putting into practice the Community Recommendations on the subject of gender violence, providing local authorities with guide-lines and indications for the development of gender-oriented policies and the investment of financial resources for the implementation and establishment of services targeted at responding to the needs of women, that would be specialised and competent in building exit strategies from violence, starting from the Women Associations who manage the Counselling Centres and Shelters.

The proposals in the Government Plan, seem to reveal a shift, on a cultural level too, towards emergency directed security and protection policies, which produces, on one side an impoverishment of the various levels of intervention and, on the other, the State's downgrading and refusal to recognise the specific, unique and specialised role of Counselling Centres and of Women run networks. By choosing not to recognise the value of their activities, the State is jettisoning years and years of experimentation, research, projects and the relative economic resources, already employed in these activities, which are necessary for the study and thorough analysis of the phenomenon of gender violence against women, and which have produced valuable implementation strategies and the development of good practice.

Moreover we are very concerned, as we realise that there is no explicit statement as to who is to be responsible for the actuation of the Plan, no mention of timing, of financing, of the evaluation of

progress both from the start and along the way, and no indication as to how to implement possibly necessary corrective actions. We also wonder how, in such a decisive phase, the application and regulation of a National Plan can make absolutely no mention of the explicit need and necessity of confronting the reality of the Women's Associations and developing the Plan's implementation with them thanks to the women's experience over so many years of working intensely hard and with great professional dedication in the field. These associations have strongly wished for the setting up of a National Plan capable of coping with gender violence, which could be nearer to women's ways of operating.