

## Conference Report

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### **Media Coverage on Sexualized Violence against Children: an International Perspective International Conference, 23rd June 2022, Hochschule Rhein-Waal, Campus Kleve**

#### **Introduction**

The Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences in Kleve, Germany hosted the conference "*Medienberichterstattung über sexualisierte Gewalt gegen Kinder*/Media Coverage on Sexualized Violence against Children" on June 23, 2022. The event was organized by the university in the frames of the joint international-comparative research project on "Child Sexual Abuse Crimes in Media Coverage – Providing Expertise for Sustainable Media Support of CSA Crimes Survivors", in cooperation with the University of Tartu in Estonia, and the Regional Public Organization of Social Projects in the Sphere of Population's Well-Being "Stellit" in St. Petersburg, Russia/Leiden, The Netherlands. The aim of the application-oriented, comparative project is to identify and analyse any existing myths in the media about sexualized violence against children and to develop practical recommendations for their deconstruction.

#### **Project overview and German Perspective**

In the opening panel, *Tatiana Zimenkova* (Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences) presented the project and explained how sexualized violence on children and youth (CSA) affects a large number of people around the world. The speaker elucidated misconceptions about the topic and explained how media-created myths surrounding CSA survivors and offenders are prejudicial to the resolution of this issue, while elaborating on the importance of improving media reporting on CSA. Zimenkova also presented the audience challenges faced by the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Advancing on the topic, *Eva Maria Hinterhuber* (Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences) outlined the next steps of the project to the audience. In this context, she also tackled the issue of terminology, introducing the discussion on whether to replace "child sexual abuse" with "sexualized violence" or "victim" with "survivor" or "person affected" in order to avoid misleading assumptions. In addition, she presented the "Framework of Issue-Specific Quality Criteria" developed by Döring and Walter (2020), thus not only reinforcing the necessity of media outlets to report on these cases responsibly, but also providing the tools to do so: The framework also was referred to in the analysis of German media coverage on CSA which was presented in the following.

Sociologist and Psychologist *Yuliya Grishina* (University of Wuppertal) introduced the German sub-project, which focused on the "Abuse Case Lügde". Grishina traced the efforts of compiling qualitative analysis of leading German publications in comparison to the criteria set by Döring and Walter (2020) and noted that scandalizing reports on CSA persist to occur. The speaker presented common ongoing myths in German media, such as blaming the victim and/or their parents, vilifying the perpetrators, and shifting responsibility to e.g. the mother or a troubled childhood.

Tatiana Zimenkova added to the findings by pointing out the need for de-individualization of the issue and the societal responsibility in these cases.

## **The Estonian Perspective**

In an engaging report of the joint project, *Simone Eelma* (University of Tartu) captivated the audience with the Estonian perspective. The M.A. and layer explained that due to the small size of the country there are only four main newspapers, which creates a particular pattern in how CSA cases are covered. Four main patterns were identified and presented by Eelma, as well as good practices solutions for each.

The first is that when one news outlet breaks the story, the others simply add an introduction and refer the reader to the original story. Therefore, if a term is wrongly used it will be misused in all publications. The speaker suggests outlets make an effort to avoid perpetuating mistakes. The second pattern perceived was that over time, the coverage of the story becomes more objective, ethical, and the correct use of terms and language also improves. Eelma suggests that correct, legal language is used from the start.

Thirdly, most news stories are enclosed behind a paywall, which the speaker noted excludes a part of the public and suggested some stories should be free to all, with information about help always freely available.

The fourth and last pattern presented by the speaker was that news usually have a strong focus on the perpetrator, especially if they are famous and/or rich. According to the research conducted by Eelma, perpetrators are regularly allowed to defend themselves and have family and friends support claims of innocence, often minimizing the claims and blaming the victims. The speaker notes that this behavior makes it harder to see the victim as a person and humanizes the perpetrator instead. A good practice in this instance would be, according to Eelma, representing the victims well and giving the same emphasis to both sides of the story.

## **Russian Child Welfare**

Director of the Helsinki Inequality Initiative (INEQ), *Meri Kulmala* (University of Helsinki) provided the audience with an engaging account of the Russian welfare system, based on extensive research and done in cooperation with practitioners of NGOs for example.

According to Kulmala, the Russian Child Protection System deals with a large number of cases with 80% of them being social orphans, in which the parents are alive but unable to care for the children. In the old Soviet system, these children were grouped by age and disability and provided with institutional, long-term care. The speaker remarked that for a while in post-socialist government there were no substantial changes, until the implementation on a new child welfare policy based on deinstitutionalization (DI).

Kulmala explains that the DI policy relocated residents in institutional care to community-based housing, with family priority as the guiding principle, and elucidated that these changes were made possible with the creation of Family Support Centers, home-like units, well-developed foster family systems and a shift from child protection to a combination of child focused and family support models.

The institutional change however still needs improvement according to Kulmala, with current issues including late intervention protecting children from parents, supporting families being less developed than foster families, difficulty to return children to families, lack of child-focused approaches, lack of prevention mechanisms, quantitative over qualitative objectives, and many changes only existing on paper. The speaker explained that there are four intertwined explanations for such: the authoritarian political regime, pressure to override child rights, strong kinship-based care, and low level of societal trust.

To conclude her presentation, Kulmala gives as a positive note the *destigmatization* of biological parents, and the development of after care and pushing evidence-based practices, and an unfortunate note that with the invasion on Ukraine this process was negatively affected.

### **Keynote Panel: The Gender Bias in the Media Coverage on Sexualized Violence**

Head of Research of World Vision Germany e.V., *Caterina Rohde-Abuba* (Bielefeld University and St. Petersburg State University) shared with the audience knowledge gathered during her research for international NGO World Vision on children victim of sexualized violence (SV).

The speaker started her talk providing an important definition of sexualized violence, which she described as a form of violence that brings sexual satisfaction to the perpetrator and which can be physical, verbal, or digital. Rohde-Abuba elaborated that an estimated one of five children experience SV in Europe, and that due to the misconception largely propagated by the media of SV being physically enforced by adult men on girls, other forms of SV are often ignored. The speaker added that the idea that adults attack children who are isolated and/or not cared for obscures the reality of it happening in crowded places such as schools and public pools and reported that it is still a taboo in society and difficult to prove, causing media coverage usually focusing on provable aspects of SV, for instance a resulting pregnancy.

Caterina Rohde-Abuba then engaged the audience with results of her research on SV in the context of flight, divided into three main topics. In the first, relating on children's origin, Rohde-Abuba stated that SV occurs within families at the same level as any other country; it is also used as a weapon of war to degrade and destabilize the population and recruit boys for fighting, and as an economic tool in forced marriages and human trafficking and prostitution. Secondly, the speaker elaborates on flight routes. Rohde-Abuba explains that transit countries are particularly dangerous due to lack of structure, especially for children not accompanied by family and for children who are accompanied but need to provide for their families or themselves through begging or prostitution. SV can be committed by family members as well as strangers, especially in situations in which there is power imbalance, for example by the police or human smugglers. The third topic presented focused on Germany as a destination country. Once again, Rohde-Abuba mentioned how power imbalance and dependency on staff in shelters, homes, schools, and leisure institutions can facilitate SV, and added that this type of violence can be even more present for LGBTQ+ children.

Caterina Rohde-Abuba concludes her impressive account by reinforcing that when the media portrays SV as a type of physical violence forced on young white girls as victims and adult men as perpetrators, other children might not see themselves and not understand that they are also suffering violence.

### **Podium Discussion: How do you find words? Sexualized violence against children and young people**

Last event of the day, the podium discussion had three notable components: municipal equal opportunities officer for the city of Kleve *Yvonne Tertilt-Rübo*; psychologist, family and trauma counselor, and head of the unit against sexualized violence on children and young people at Caritas Kleve *Katja Kleinebenne*; and social scientist *Thomas Swiderek* (Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences). The discussion was moderated by Tatiana Zimenkova, who started with the topic of communicating with and assisting children in need of help. Kleinebenne contributed that in a small scale, children need assistance in being able to recognize what happens to them and need an average of seven attempts to be able to talk about SV, and adults need to learn how to talk about it.

Zimenkova then asked the group how they think reporting should occur so that the practice is optimal for publicizing the crimes and also the counseling services. Swiderek replied considering the scandalizing approach usually used by the media, and how these depersonalized accounts do not hold people's interest long. Tertilt-Rübo added that there needs to be more respect and thought in media reporting of SV and that more outlets should

refer to guidelines on the topic. The discussion briefly shifted to child protection versus censorship, which the discussants agreed is a difficult topic.

The moderator then proposed that if it was possible to create reporting standards and taboos for certain topics, it should also be possible to create this in the case of sexualized violence against children, and asked participants if they believe social actors are particularly cautious and what preventive measures they are taking. Discussants note there is fear that when news are published, thoroughness will be sacrificed over the story. Hinterhuber joins the discussion to ask if there are also situations in which they would actively seek media coverage and where would their strengths be, to which a positive example proposed by discussants was the exposure of Catholic Church scandals. An interested audience member then asked how to recognize suspicious behavior and address the issue, to which discussants agreed that while there should be more effort in making this knowledge more accessible, there is material available for self-education. Another audience member asked how realistic would it be for such training to be part of the curriculum for educators in Germany, to which Kleinebenne replied that there are already some efforts in that direction, and Tertilt-Rübo added that social workers in the city of Kleve are offered training on the topic. Swiderek included that while children's rights has now been accepted, topics of gender diversity and sexualized violence are not yet free of conflict, to which Kleinebenne added that there has been a recent wave of backwards thought that she hopes will revert in the future.

As their closing words, Tertilt-Rübo informed that municipalities like Kleve are great options to work with children and kindly invited the students present to do so, and Swiderek concluded saying that people should talk to children not only in the event of a problem, but before something happens.

### **Summary**

To sum up, the conference provided the audience with a great range of current and important information on sexualized violence against children, especially in respect to the role and responsibility of the media. It became clear throughout the many compelling and engaging addresses of the day that reports on sexualized violence have a great impact on general perception of the case and on the victims, and therefore should be done responsibly. For such, there are tools immediately available to reporters like the “Framework of Issue-Specific Quality Criteria” developed by Döring and Walter (2020), and, in the nearest future, also the guideline provided as a result of the international joint project “Child Sexual Abuse Crimes in Media Coverage – Providing Expertise for Sustainable Media Support of CSA Crimes Survivors”.

### **Reference:**

Nicola Döring & Roberto Walter (2020) Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse: A Framework of Issue-Specific Quality Criteria, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 29:4, 393-412, DOI: 10.1080/10538712.2019.1675841