

UMAR'S POLICY FOR CHILDREN:

Elisabete Brasil

How does UMAR act regarding children who are direct or indirect victims of domestic violence?

Regarding children who are victims of violence, UMAR has the legal obligation to report any crimes committed against children. Our intervention does not have as a main objective the defense of the rights of children. But this is a cause and a civic obligation which respects all, and therefore attention and care for children is a concern in each case and process, as well as in our practice in terms of the concrete resolution of situations and our participation in CPCJs [Commissions for the Protection of Children and Youth]. UMAR acts differently depending if the intervention is at the Centro de Atendimento [Center for victims of gender violence], Casa de Abrigo [Shelter], or at a more general level of the policy of the association. At this latter level, what should be noted in particular is the work we have been developing, for many years now, in the domains of gender equality and prevention of gender violence, including: implementing programs for the prevention of deviant behaviour; awareness-raising actions in schools; and partnering with services and institutions with direct response targeted towards children, as well as our participation in CPCJs, institutions promoting and protecting the rights of children.

How does UMAR understand the relationship with children within the Casa Abrigo [Shelter] and the Centros de Atendimento [Centers]?

Intervention in the Shelter and in the Centers is highly differentiated. Women arriving at the Centers come either in an emergency situation or after scheduling an appointment. In emergency situations intervention is done with the whole family, but in following cases, and the crisis resolution work, it is done with the women and directed to them. This intervention in crisis situations has a short duration, as different kind of intervention is not within the scope or the objectives of the Centers. Following this, work done with children focuses on supporting them in terms of emerging needs and in providing play activities. Regarding the cases being followed, women generally come to the Center alone or in the company of a friend or family member and, often, during school times, and therefore children do not usually accompany the mothers. However, the sons and daughters of the women using the Center can also benefit from the psychotherapy services provided. In the Shelter intervention is different. Here, children, the mothers and the team conceive and run activities, develop actions geared towards the children, and so intervention with them is a particular, intentionalized, part of the work being developed in the Shelters.

Is there specific work done with the children?

Yes. Besides helping them with their school work, specific activities are designed with and for the children, and at the same time in the work done with the mothers, and at different levels, the specific needs of the children are considered and integrated.

If that is the case, who conducts this work?

The whole team is involved but the work is led by a professional with the specific function of taking care of the children. In one of the Shelters this professional is a clinical psychologist and in the other

Shelter the same work is done by a social educator.

What kind of activities are developed? Are they planned or spontaneous? Are they evaluated [assessed]? In which way(s)?

There are planned activities as well as spontaneous ones. The planned ones are part of the global action plan of the Shelters. Given the specificities of the Shelters and the short time of stay, only very rarely does a child stay in the Shelter for a whole year. Thus, even though there are activities planned, globally, for periods such as holidays, for occupying free time during school breaks, etc., most activities are focused on the group of children and youngsters that are staying in the Shelter at the time and try to respond to their specific interests and needs. Assessment is performed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative assessment focuses on the annual verification of the amount of activities that took place from the whole set of activities that were planned (and expected to take place). There is a qualitative assessment of the participation and involvement of the children and youngsters in the activities as well as of their satisfaction with them.

How are children (those who are of school age) integrated in schools and followed?

The first contact with schools is conducted by the professional in charge of working with the children. She makes the contact, usually via phone, with the School Board or with the person in the school responsible for managing the contact with UMAR and lets them know of the need for integrating the student(s), the grade the child is in, and the date the child is expected to be coming to the Shelter, so that the child can be integrated in school during the same day he/she comes to the Shelter, or during the following day. Contact is also made with the school the child attends, inform them and to request the child's file. After this, for the first day in the new school, the mother is accompanied to the school by a professional from UMAR, in order to help her to get familiarized with the place and so that she can then do the same with her child (or children). From then on, it is the mother who follows the school life of the child (or children) even though she can rely on the support of the team and, particularly, on the support of the professional whose work is dedicated to the children and youngsters at the Shelter.

Is there any special concern regarding the issue of vocational guidance for older children?

Older children coming to the Shelter are, usually, half-way through their school years and have already made their vocational choices – in terms of their High School options. That means that often vocational guidance has happened already prior to their integration at the Shelter. For those coming at the end of their 9th grade, and who will be starting their 10th grade while they are still in the Shelter, the decision is left to the mothers and the children themselves. There is the possibility of getting them some financial assistance for the costs involved in vocational assessment and guidance that takes place at the school but which is performed by external companies and must be paid by parents.

In terms of health, how are these children's rights to health assistance assured?

Shelters have a family doctor who works with them. When women and children come to the Shelter they

are automatically registered with this family doctor. Health is an area considered a priority by women and therefore both routine appointments and specialist consultations, both for them or for the children, are readily available through the partnerships UMAR has established. Consultations in specialities such as Child Psychiatry, Psychology, or Speech Therapy are facilitated through the partnerships made with Central Hospitals, Associations or Clinics such as OLHAR with which UMAR has standing protocols. If and when there are costs these are covered by UMAR for the time children are staying in the Shelter. Sometimes, and depending on the income of the mothers, they might start, after some months, covering these costs as a way of starting to understand and integrate it as one of the expenses which will be necessary to take into account once they leave the Shelter.

Is any work specifically done with children in terms of their *recovery* regarding victimization?

Whenever children need time and space to talk about their experiences they can find someone to talk to in the Shelter, though these conversations do not happen in a therapeutic context but rather in an informal one. Our perspective has thus far been that of understanding the Shelter as a home space in a stricter sense and so not including therapies. Therapies occur outside the Shelter, as in any other case with psychologists not making home visits. That is also useful in distinguishing the space of the Shelter from the extra-Shelter space, also facilitating the continuance of therapeutic relations after the women and children leave the Shelter. Moreover, the Shelter does not possess the necessary human resources to provide these services. Other activities such as those on the theme of equality and violence specifically, happen every year on the International Day Against Gender Violence, i.e. every 25th November. One can therefore say that, in a structured fashion, children find educational support and integration, in that they are watched over, guided and cared for.